AFTER THE BATTLE

WRECKS ON ST. KILDA
MASSACRE AT BANDE
ARTWORK OF THE EIGHTH

Number 30

AFTER THE BATTLE

NUMBER 30

Edited by Winston G. Ramsey

Published by Battle of Britain Prints International Ltd., 3 New Plaistow Road, Stratford, London E15 3JA, England
Telephone: 01-534 8833

Printed in Great Britain by Plaistow Press Magazines Ltd., London E15 3JA

© Copyright 1980

After the Battle is published quarterly on the 15th February, May, August and November.

United Kingdom Newsagent Distribution:
Seymour Press Ltd., 334 Brixton Road
London SW9 7AG. Telephone 01-733 4444

United States Trade Distribution and Subscriptions:
Sky Books International, Inc.,
48 East 50th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022

Canadian Distribution and Subscriptions:
Yesterday's Glory, PO Box 393,
Dorval, Quebec, H4Y 1B1

Dutch Language Edition:
Quo Vadis,
F.C. Kuyperstraat 9
3761 EG Soest
Telephone: 02155-18641

CONTENTS

CRIME IN WWII
Massacre at Bande 1

WAR FILMS
Angels One Five 11

IT HAPPENED HERE
The Last Flight of the only Battle of Britain VC 19

PRESERVATION
The Jeremiah O'Brien 22

WRECK RECOVERY
Wartime Wrecks on St. Kilda 28
The Sunderland at Gleann Mhor 29
The Beaufighter on Conachair 33
Wellington on Soay 37

UNITED KINGDOM
Death of an Aerodrome 44
Artwork of the Eighth 47

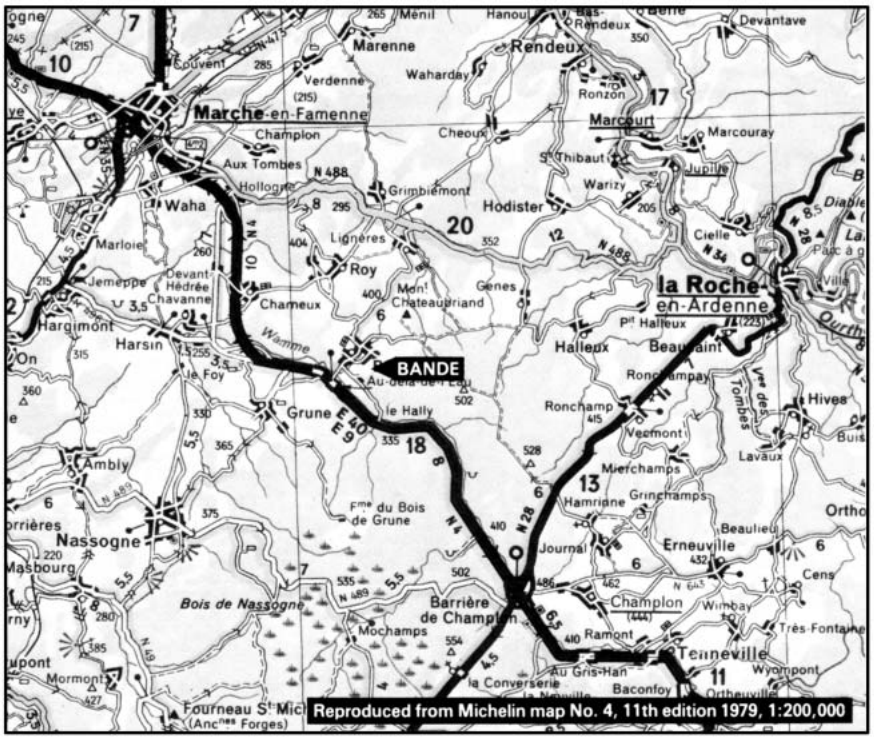
Front Cover: Nelson Morton examines the solitary airscrew on the top of Conachair from the Beaufighter which crashed there on June 3, 1943 (Reverend John C. Barry).

Centre Pages: The last Liberty ship — SS *Jeremiah O'Brien* — on her last voyage on May 21, 1980 with the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco in the background (Dan Maskell).

Back Cover: Steve Gotts with the 385th Fighter Group panel discovered in a farmer's shed near Great Ashfield in 1972 (Steve Gotts).

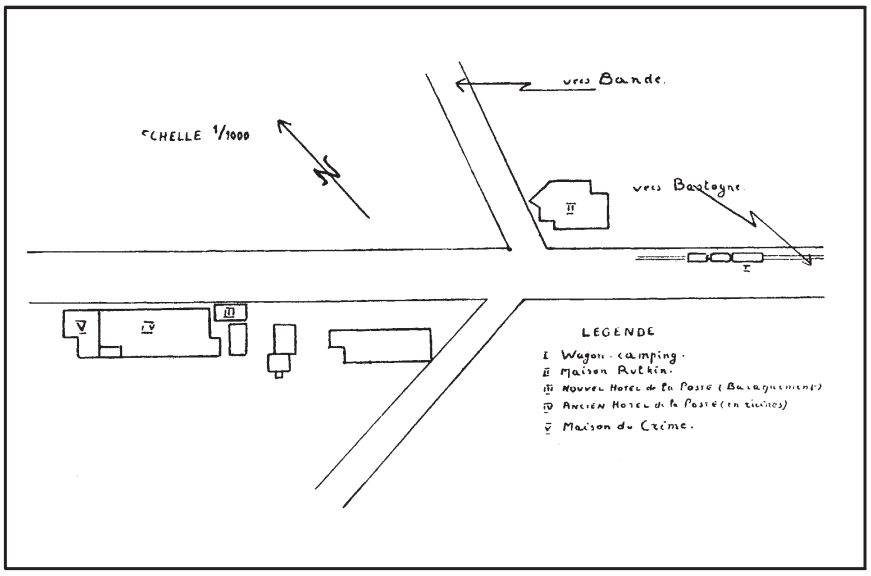
Photographs designated IWM are the copyright of the Imperial War Museum, London.

ISSN: 0306-154X



In September 1944, the Allied armies were sweeping north-eastwards across France and Belgium encountering only light resistance. The Ardennes lay in the path of the US Vth Corps and, spread over a fifty-mile front, the Corps moved through southern Belgium and Luxembourg in a dozen or more parallel columns. The main Brussels-Luxembourg road ran across this line of advance passing through Namur, Bastogne and Arlon. Beside the main road, just south-east of Marche, lies the little village of Bande. In 1944 houses lined both sides of La Grande Route although the main part of the village itself lay on the hillside a few hundred yards to the north.

On September 5, as American forces were approaching the district, a unit of the Maquis camped in the woods nearby attacked a German unit killing three soldiers. At the same time, inhabitants of the village courageously put out their Belgian flags in anticipation of their liberation. As a reprisal for these acts, the following day the Germans set fire to the houses bordering La Grande Route. Two days later the Americans arrived, the Germans retreating eastwards towards the prepared positions of the Siegfried Line.



Sketch plan from the report of the Belgian War Crimes Commission which investigated the massacre in February 1945. La Grande Route — the N4 — runs from left to right. I, 'Wagon camping' refers to the quarters of the SS-Standgericht; II, the Maison Rulkin, is the sawmill; III, Nouvel Hotel de la Poste (a wooden building), is where the victims were later laid out for identification; IV is the burned-out Cafe de la Poste belonging to M. Marechal and V, Maison du Crime, is the Bertrand house.

Just over three months later, Bande lay in the centre of the von Rundstedt offensive launched at daybreak on December 16. A column of German tanks, driving north-westward along the snow-covered road to the River Meuse, arrived at Bande at about 2.00 p.m. on December 22. The Germans took over the village and it was significant that some of the troops were the same ones that had been there in September. The Mayor, M. Armand Pierre, recognised several soldiers three of whom were officers' orderlies who lodged in the same house they had used three months previously.

Two days later, on the morning of December 24, another group of about twenty-five men wearing brown and green camouflage suits arrived at the burned-out houses along the main road. They all wore caps with the death's head emblem and were identified as members of the Sicherheitsdienst by the white letters SD on badges on the left sleeves of their uniforms. The SD unit immediately set about the systematic arrest of all the men in the village between the age of 17 and 32. The 24th was a Sunday and some men were taken from the church during the Christmas Eve High Mass. When questioned as to the reason for the arrests, the villagers were told they were to go to a control post to verify their identity cards. Womenfolk were told that their men would be back for Christmas dinner but were surprised to hear the Germans speaking very correct French; some having a faubourian accent, others used French slang. Walloon and Liege dialects were also detected.

Having assembled some seventy men (including a few outside the age group), they were marched down the hill to 'Control' which had been set up in the remains of the Rulkin sawmill beside the main road. (The mill belonged to M. Rulkin-Tasiaux and had been

CHRISTMAS EVE 1944 MASSACRE AT BANDE

Top: **Scene of crime photograph from the Commission's report — the original Cafe de la Poste, burned by the Germans on September 6, 1944 as a reprisal for the Maquis killing, is in the centre.** *Above:* **Now renamed the Cafe du Monument, its facade has been modernised with only the doorway of the Bertrand house being retained. The new N4 lies out of the photograph to the left; one sees here the 'Grande Route' in its original width, now used as a convenient parking layby. Due to the post-war widening of the N4, all the buildings on the north-western side of the road, including the sawmill, have been demolished. (Visitors to Bande should not be confused by another sawmill which lies further down the road.)**

set on fire in September.) Here they were joined by other Belgians from Grune, a little hamlet lying just to the south of the main road.

At 1.00 p.m. the SD men began interrogating the prisoners as to the events which had taken place in September 1944. While this was going on, the Mayor of Bande was ordered to collect all the Belgian flags in the village which were subsequently burned in an oven at the sawmill.

During these interrogations, which lasted until 5.00 p.m., requests were made by the Germans for cognac and wine. Albert Schmitz was 'persuaded' to supply 200 bottles of lemonade in return for his freedom and the Germans offered to free a local farmer, Armand Toussaint, and his son on delivery of twenty bottles of wine and three bottles of cognac. When he returned to the village to get what had been requested, M. Toussaint asked the Wehrmacht officer billeted in his farmhouse to intercede on behalf of the prisoners. This the German officer agreed to do but soon returned saying, 'I cannot do anything for you. Those men are strangers. They must have something to drink for Christmas. Go and bring them what they want, there is nothing else to do'.

Towards evening, the younger men were segregated and led out of the sawmill to be lined up in three rows in the snow. They were relieved of all their possessions. From there, with hands on their heads, the prisoners were marched along La Grande Route to the burned out Cafe de la Poste belonging to a M. Marechal. After being called to a halt, the men were ordered to turn to face across the road. There were thirty-three all told and they were guarded by seven or eight soldiers armed with rifles or sub-machine guns and commanded by three officers. After a short discussion, two of the officers left to return to the sawmill leaving in charge the one who had led the interrogations and who spoke French with a Parisian accent. He went into the house next door to the cafe — that of M. Bertrand.

A Feldwebel of small stature, aged about forty, then approached the last man in the rear rank and laid a hand on his shoulder. At this stage none of the prisoners had any idea of what was planned. They watched the Feldwebel take his man to the door of the Bertrand house. As he entered and disappeared from their view, a shot rang out.

The German returned and placed his hand on the end man in the second row and led him away in the same manner. Another shot followed. By now the remaining thirty-one men must have realised what was in store for them. As each prisoner entered the door, an SD man, standing inside the entrance so that he could not be seen from outside, fired point-blank into his victim's neck and, with a jerk of his knee, sent the body hurtling into the open cellar. If the prisoner still screamed, a second shot followed instantly.

After twenty men had been executed it was the turn of 21-year-old Leon Praile. He had understood from the very first shot what was to be their fate. He saw what would happen if they all stood meekly awaiting their turn and he tried to incite the others to make a break and attack the guards. He implored that they had nothing to lose but the others were too terrified and in no state to react.

However, Leon was determined not to go like a lamb to the slaughter. When his turn came, he noticed that the Feldwebel was crying. When they were both about six feet from the entrance, Leon gathered all his strength and smashed the German in the face with his right fist. Running for fifty yards, he crossed the main road and scrambled across the River Wamme and into the fields on the other side. The guards were firing at him all the time but failed to score a hit. Although he then tried to escape to the American lines there were too many German patrols and he returned to take refuge in his uncle's barn.

Commission photograph showing the interior of the Bertrand house after the corpses had been removed. After entering the doorway, the victims were each shot in the nape of the neck and then pushed into the cellar in the left foreground.

Today the doorway provides a reference point to the same spot which has been transformed into a memorial garden. The cellar has been roofed over (with access down a flight of steps behind the wooden balustrade) and is now a tiny chapel of remembrance.

Meanwhile the Christmas Eve massacre continued. When all thirty-two men had been killed, the Germans covered the bodies with three layers of planks of wood. The cellar was open to the sky and, as night fell, snow soon covered all traces of the dreadful act.

In the late afternoon, the Mayor of Grune and a local language professor, M. Chardonne, had gone to Bande to try to secure the release of the prisoners. When they arrived at the sawmill it was about 6.00 p.m. and they found only the elder prisoners. Being told to leave, they inadvertently moved off up the road in the direction of the Bertrand house. They heard gunshots coming from somewhere nearby but a German soldier intercepted them and roughly ordered them to go away. This they did but not before they had seen two rows of men standing in front of the Cafe de la Poste. Leaving La Grande Route to pass along a small path a hundred yards behind the house, they heard more shots and machine gun fire.

On the Monday — Christmas Day — another thirty-three Belgians were rounded up in the village of Roy, a mile or so north of Bande. In the afternoon they were marched to the Rulkin sawmill and interrogated in the same manner as the men from Grune and Bande. About 9.00 p.m. two men, Georges and Raymond Malempre, were singled out. While the others were set free, the two brothers were taken to the Bertrand house where they were shot and thrown into the cellar.

The following day saw the relief of Bastogne seventeen miles down the road towards Luxembourg and the tide of battle turned against the Germans. On January 10 the Germans evacuated Bande which was liberated by British troops the following day. On the arrival of the Allied forces, the mayor reported the massacre to the senior British officer and asked him to accompany him and

Above: **On January 16, 1945, Sergeant Covey photographed Sergeant W. Lawrie, an Army Film Unit cameraman, inspecting the cellar (IWM).** *Below left:* **Later Sergeant Lawrie interviewed M. Constant Volvert whose 17-year old son was one of those killed (IWM).** *Below right:* **He also had an opportunity to speak to 21-year old Leon Praille who tried to persuade the prisoners to revolt. When his turn came, he punched his escort, Ernst Haldimann, in the face and managed to escape in the resulting confusion (IWM).**

Left: **Leon Praille tries to identify the victims laid out in the Hotel de la Poste. The Reverend Musty recognised many as his pupils at the ecclesiastical seminary at Bastogne. (Commission photographs.)**

After the harrowing job of identifying the dead had been completed, the bodies were carried outside the wooden cafe where thirty-four coffins had been prepared. Nearly every family in the village had lost someone and distraught relatives watched as the flag-draped coffins were loaded into lorries by the 9th Parachute Battalion of the 6th Airborne Division.

the sole survivor to the death house. Army photographers, Sergeants Hardy, Covey and Lawrie, were detailed to record the visit in all its gruesome detail. The snow was several inches thick and, having shovelled it aside and removed the boards, the shocking scene of horror was laid bare. The bodies, stiff and frozen, were lifted out and laid in the Cafe de la Poste for identification. Every victim showed a bullet wound in the nape of the neck, the bullet having travelled in an upward direction as far as the forehead or face

It was not easy to identify the bodies which were covered in blood with their hands clenched and it must have been a heart-rending task for their grief-stricken families before the bodies were taken outside to be placed in their coffins.

After travelling about a kilometre up the hill to Bande, the cortege halted for the funeral service in the village church (IWM).

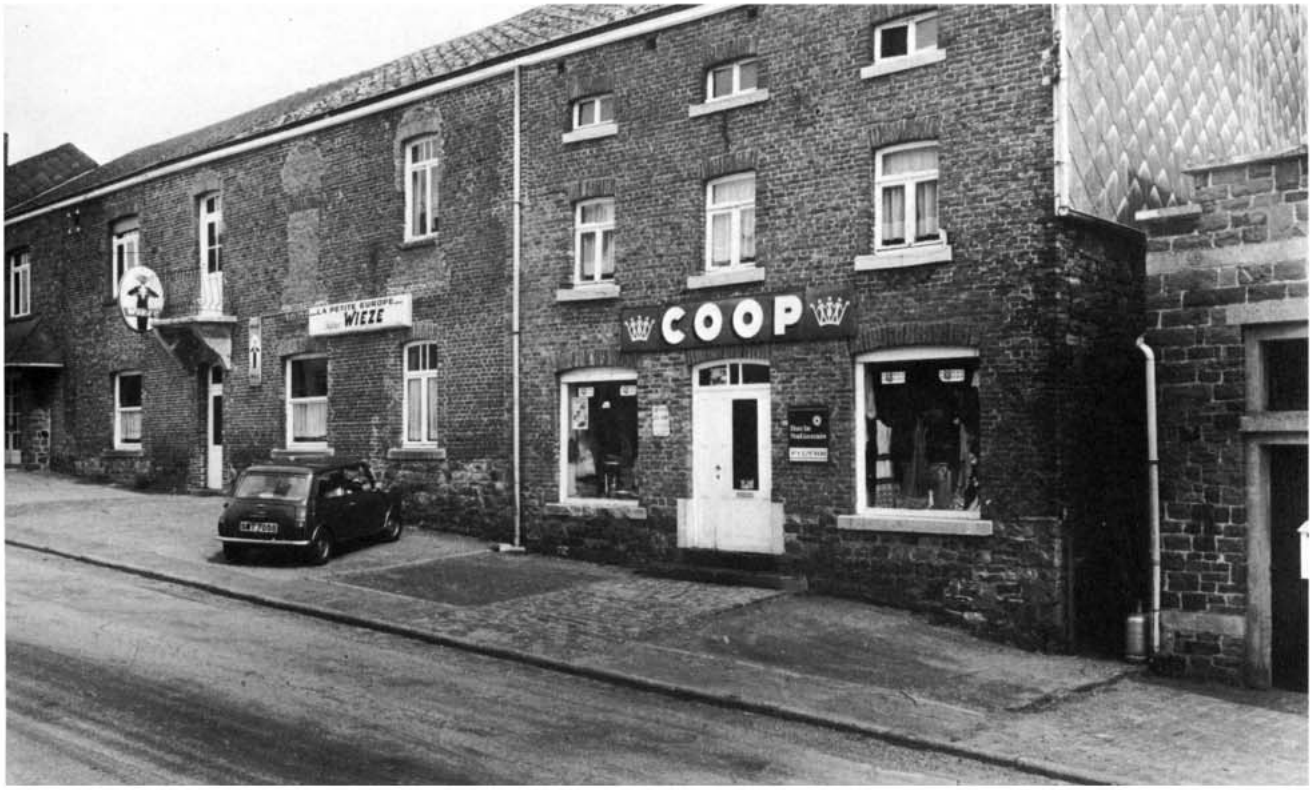
The final death toll was established as follows:

1 MULLER, Clement Joseph Leon, born in Marcour, age 25.
2 TOURNAY, Xavier Joseph Henri, born in Bande, age 19.
3 MAITREJEAN, Edmond Joseph Gilles, born in Bande, age 18.
4 GOUVERNEUR, Andre Leopold Leon Ghislain, born in Bande, age 17.
5 MICHEL, Armand Joseph Lambert, age 21.
6 MAREE, Richard Hubert Georges, born in Bande, age 23.
7 LAMBERT, Gaston Emile Constant, born in Hotton, age 31.
8 MAGONETTE, Fernand Emile Constant, born in Erneuville, age 21.
9 MARCHAL, Albert Fernand Maurice Ghislain, born in Bande, age 28.
10 MATAGNE, Rene Victor Joseph, born in Bande, age 28.
11 HARDY, Roger Albert Joseph, born in Tenneville, age 20.
12 PONCIN, Joseph Ghislain Arthur, born in Tenneville, age 18.
13 VOLVERT, Albert Maurice Ghislain Joseph, born in Ramont-Tenneville, age 17.
14 DUCHENE, Octave Edmond Joseph, born in Berhain (Flamierge), age 18.
15 DUCHENE, Joseph Marie Florent, born in Berhain, age 23.
16 GUISSART, Victor Charles Joseph, born in Flamierge, age 20
17 SMITZ, Paul Emile Hubert, born in Grune, age 17.
18 GUISSART, Florent Charles Joseph, born in Flamierge, age 21.
19 LEROY, Alphonse Leon Joseph Gilles, born in Grune, age 18.
20 PETRON, Louis Desire Joseph, born in Hodister, age 26.
21 GIRS, Fernand Auguste Jean Felicien, born in Vaux (Noville), age 21.
22 GIRS, Georges Albert Joseph, born in Vaux (Noville), age 20.
23 DE GARDE, Jean Henri, born in Liege, age 24.
24 DACO, Donia Armand Joseph, born in Hompre, age 24.

Above: **The procession then continued on its way up the main street to the cemetery on the western extremity of the village (IWM).** *Below:* **Although some modernisation has taken place in Bande, its character still remains as it was on that sad day in January 1945.**

25 PARMENTIER, Joseph, born in Rencheux (Vielsalm), age 19.
26 LAMBERT, Herman, born in Hotton, age 22.
27 LASSANCE, Andre Pierre Ghislain, born in Amberloup, age 22.
28 LASSANCE, Fernand Elie Ghislain, born in Amberloup, age 18.
29 LAMBERT, Lucien, born in Hotton, age 22.
30 MALEMPRE, Georges Jacques Pierre, born in Flemalle-Haute, age 27.
31 MALEMPRE, Raymond Victor Joseph Pierre, born in Flemalle-Haute, age 23.
32 HENKINET, Joseph, age 27.
33 NOEL, Jules, age 20.
34 BOURGEOIS, Andre, age 20.

Only eight were natives of Bande, the others, except for the Malempre brothers from Roy and Paul Smitz, Alphonse Leroy and Louis Petron from Grune, being refugees from neighbouring villages.



Drs. Max Lahaut and Marcel Ferir examined all the bodies and established that the victims had also been shot at while lying in the cellar as many had bullet wounds in other parts of their bodies. Cartridge cases and bullets removed from the corpses were examined by Captain Commandant Baeten and Major General Mage who established that at least two kinds of 9mm weapon were used for the killings. Seventeen cartridge cases bore the imprint of one weapon, probably a Schmeisser sub-machine gun, and three had come from another similar weapon. It was not believed that a pistol could have been used and the official report of the ballistics experts stated: 'Although it seems that only one person fired at least on the first prisoners, it is not possible to establish whether a second one fired or whether the isolated shots and the rounds of firing have been fired by one and the same man'.

A Commission des Crimes de Guerre had already been set up by Belgian Royal Decree on December 13, 1944 with the task of investigating war crimes committed on Belgian soil and to prepare separate files on each case to help bring the perpetrators to justice. The members of the Commission assigned to the Bande massacre arrived at the village to conduct their investigation on February 9, 1945. Naturally M. Leon Praile, a bank clerk in Marche, was the most important witness. They were also provided with the report from Lieutenant Valcke, liaison officer of the 51st Highland Division, dated December 18, 1944; medical reports from the doctors who had examined the bodies; the report from the ballistics experts; reports of an investigation by the military auditors at Namur and Arlon and the judicial files of the American Army compiled by Captain Victor Darling of the XII Army Corps.

Although the regular German Army unit in Bande village contained men who had been there three months prior to the massacre, having considered all the evidence, the Commission were firmly of the belief that they were not responsible. Several of the Wehrmacht soldiers billeted in the village had expressed their sorrow over what had taken place and they had explained to the villagers that the unit was unknown to them. When these regular soldiers asked the men on the main road to which unit they belonged they received the answer: 'Special Himmler troops' and 'we don't belong to any unit, we are a Standgericht' (a difficult word to translate having no precise equivalent in English — basically a Security Police squad with the power to arrest and execute on the spot).

It was established that the majority of men from the special unit had lived in a railway wagon standing on the railway line which ran along the edge of the northern side of the main road just beyond the sawmill. The unit was identified as being from the SD (Gestapo). One German officer, a Lieutenant Spaan billeted in Bande, confided to one villager that orders had come directly from Himmler to have thirty men executed to avenge the three Germans killed in September by the underground. Two more were to be shot for the murder of a Belgian collaborator in June 1944.

The preponderance of French accents and dialects in the group linked the unit to similar crimes at Givry and Noville and the Commission was able to establish the identity of at least one man — Ernst Haldimann — a German speaking Swiss born in Pfeffingen.

Haldimann grew up in Switzerland and undertook an industrial/commercial apprenticeship. After an eighteen-month prison sentence for theft, he went to work in France in 1938. From June 1942 he worked on the German Army training establishment at Le Valdahon but was jailed again for theft the following year.

On leaving prison, Haldimann joined the SS at Dijon on November 15, 1943 becoming an Unterscharfuehrer in December. He served in various locations in France, mostly in Alsace-Lorraine, and suffered minor wounds during an air attack on Freiburg-im-Bresgau. In December 1944, his unit was integrated with other SD units into 'SS-Kommando zu besonderer Verwendung 8' (No. 8 SS Commando for special duties) numbering some 200 men.

According to Haldimann's indictment, the unit was assigned to the 8th SS Panzer Division for the Ardennes offensive but this would seem to be an error and should read 2nd SS Panzer Division. The detachment sent to Bande was commanded by Untersturmfuehrer Krueger.

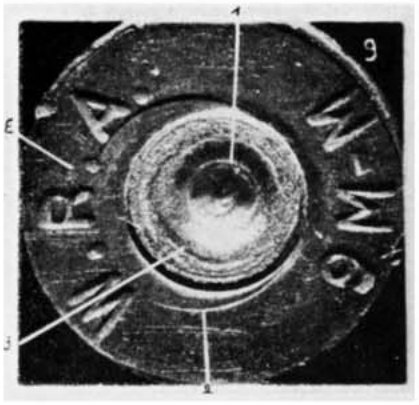
When the war was over, Haldimann entered Switzerland illegally on February 3, 1946 and was picked up by the police and jailed. On January 28, 1948, he was charged by a Swiss Army Court with entering a foreign armed service, murder on several counts, assistance with attempted murder and multiple murder.

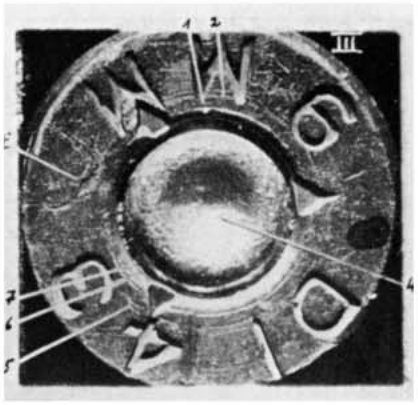
Haldimann confessed that he had been a

Men of the 9th Paras unload the coffins at the entrance to the cemetery (IWM).

Thirty-four years later, we revisited Bande to take these photographs. It was a warm, summer's day — a stark contrast to the chill of that grief-stricken day.

January 17, 1945. Sergeant Covey records the scene in the cemetery. The mourners are overcome with grief as their loved ones are lowered into the ground. The plot selected was only for a temporary burial until relatives could arrange for permanent interment in each family's grave (IWM).





The official ballistics examination of the fired cartridge cases indicated that at least two different weapons had been used, the firing pin being off centre on the primer cap on the left. Note that both rounds are captured ammunition, possibly from the Maquis. *Left,* **US-made by Winchester Repeating Arms and,** *right,* **from Defence Industries of Canada.**

member of the SD unit in Bande on December 24, 1944 but that all he had done was to escort each victim, one by one, to the house to be shot. He claimed that two French members of the SS-Kommando actually did the shooting, one holding the prisoner while the other shot him with a machine pistol. He said that the two executioners changed places during the massacre and that other members of the group joined in killing the last few Belgians. Like many others charged with war crimes, Haldimann claimed in his defence that he was only carrying out his orders.

On April 28, 1948 the Swiss Court gave its judgement and found Haldimann guilty on all counts. The court accepted as a mitigating circumstance the fact the the accused had not instigated the massacre and had acted under orders. Therefore the court stated it would not pronounce a life sentence but the maximum sentence according to the law:

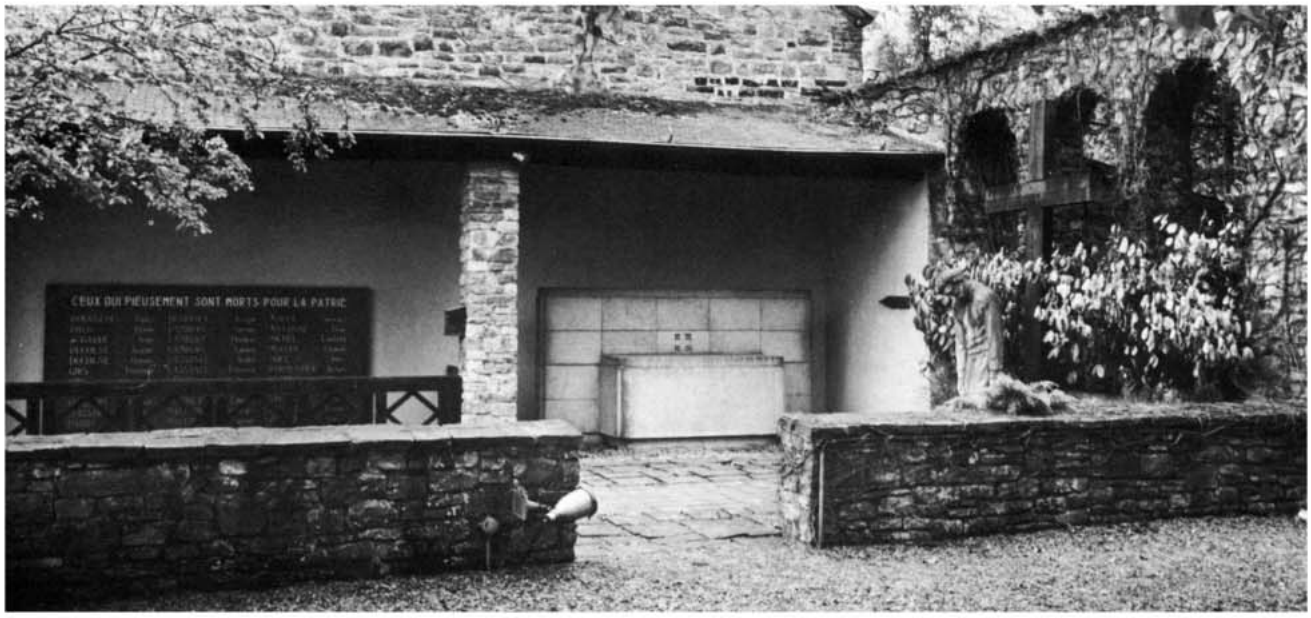
1) Twenty years imprisonment less 396 days spent in custody before the trial
2) Exclusion from the Armed Forces for life
3) No public office to be held for ten years
4) Payment of costs of 1933.95 Swiss Francs

Haldimann had already been sentenced to death in absentia on August 21, 1945 by the French Court of Justice at Besancon for espionage and denunciation of French resistance members to the Germans. He served his Swiss sentence in a Zuchthaus — a severe form of prison — in Liestal Prison. He was released on a four-year parole on June 27, 1960.

According to the Auditorat General of the Military Court in Brussels, Ernst Haldimann is the only member of SS-Kommando No. 8 that has been brought to trial and convicted for the massacre at Bande.

Today the Cafe de la Poste (although renamed Cafe du Monument) still stands at Bande, although the huge, busy E40/N4 highway, widened post-war, runs on a new alignment a few yards to the north. This modernisation has left a small section of the old Grande Route intact and it is therefore possible to park and examine the scene of the massacre in safety. From the outside, the restored cafe looks no different from dozens of others passed by tourists driving hell-for-leather down this major route across Belgium to Luxembourg and Germany. On the right-hand side, only the doorway of the Bertrand house remains but it must be the most tragic doorway of all, knowing what took place just inside. The cellar has now been roofed over to form a small chapel of remembrance complete with the enamelled photographs of the victims which are so prevalent on Continental family memorials. Flowers and candles are always in place and a plaque on the wall inside the doorway above lists those that died.

From the cellar of death, we followed the route taken by the funeral cortege up the hill to the village church. The cemetery, surrounded by a high wall, lies outside the village to the north-west. The temporary mass grave used to bury the victims in 1945 is now just a patch of grass as, subsequently, the bodies were re-interred in family tombs elsewhere in the cemetery. Examination of the inscriptions on many of the graves dated December 24, 1944 bears witness to the extent of the tragedy which befell this little Belgian community.



AFTER THE BATTLE

WAR FILMS

Forty years ago the Battle of Britain was being fought over southern England and, although readers will be aware that we have covered the subject in great detail in our new 720-page book, it would seem appropriate to include a topical item in this issue appearing as it does during the 40th Anniversary of the battle.

Angels One Five was the first post-war film to be produced with the Battle of Britain as its central theme. Although by present-day standards of wide screens, technicolor and elaborate special effects the black and white 1951 production fares badly, the film is outstanding for one special reason. It was the deliberate intention of the producers, John W. Gossage and Derek Twist (who also wrote the screenplay), to make the film using as many RAF personnel as possible, both behind and in front of the cameras. Both producers were ex-RAF and the director, George More O'Ferrall, up till then an exponent of television drama, was an army liaison officer in the Fighter Command Operations Room. The film was based on a story by Wing Commander A. J. C. Pelham-Groom (a Group Captain in 1951), Sector Controller at Biggin Hill who also acted as Technical Advisor. He died in 1978. It was filmed by Chris Challis who served as a cameraman with the RAF Film Unit.

On the acting side, Ronald Adam (who died in 1974) was Sector Controller at Hornchurch and was 'promoted' in the film to No. 11 Group Controller. Cyril Raymond was also a Sector Controller stationed at Kenley and he replayed his role in the film. Humphrey Lestocq (better known as radio's 'Flying Officer Kite') found it easy to portray the role of a Hurricane pilot having flown the aircraft during the war. Michael Denison, on the other hand, who plays a leading role as a squadron leader in the film, served in the Royal Corps of Signals and Intelligence Corps and Jack Hawkins was in the Royal Welch Regiment and ended up a Colonel. He plays the role of the Station Commander (Group Captain 'Tiger' Small) combining the personalities of two of the battle's Station Commanders: Group Captain Richard Grice of Biggin Hill and Group Captain Oliver Bryson of Manston.

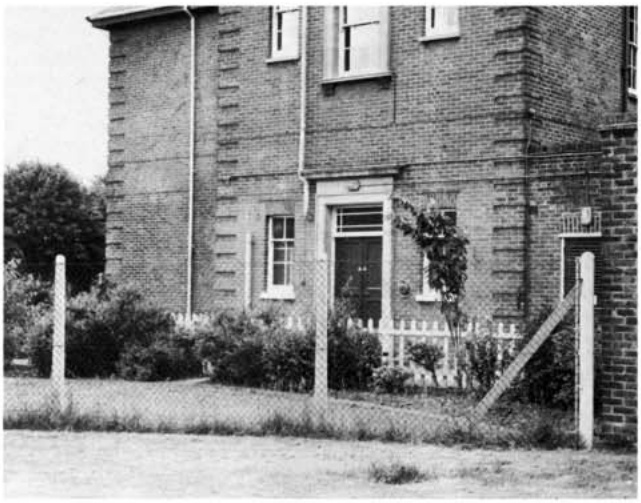
Two authentic locations are used in the film: RAF Kenley, then still operational, and the original No. 11 Group underground Operations Room. The film company was given special permission to film in the ops room as this was still top secret and *Angels One Five* revealed it to the public for the first time. (An interesting footnote came when we visited the room during our research on *The Battle of Britain — Then and Now.* On the walls are several pictures which visitors are shown as being of the room in operation during the war. The pictures were, in fact, taken during the making of the film in 1951 and Ronald Adam is easily identifiable as are the studio lights!)

When Harry Saltzman came to make his *Battle of Britain* in 1969, he had to open up the 1940 aerodromes and 'dress' these for the occasion. No such problem was encountered with the making of *Angels One Five* as RAF Kenley still remained largely as it was in 1940 — after, that is, August 18 when the camp suffered a devastating low-level German attack which destroyed many of the buildings including hangars. (Even the sole Belfast hangar seen in the film is now no more having burned down on October 23, 1978.)

HERE COME THE FIGHTER PILOTS
HAWKS IN THE SUN
THE NEW BATTLE OF BRITAIN FILM IN PRODUCTION AT ELSTREE STUDIOS
AN ASSOCIATED BRITISH-TEMPLAR PRODUCTION

Above: **How the film began at the Associated British Picture Corporation studios at Elstree. 'Hawks in the Sun' the original title of the film, is seen being paraded past stage 3 by some of the actors. 'Leader' of the group is 'Flight Lieutenant' Humphrey Lestocq, second from left, who plays 'Batchy' Salter.** *Top:* **As released in March 1952.**

Above left: Just as Duxford was used as a main base for the 1969 film 'Battle of Britain', RAF Kenley, then still operational, was chosen for shooting 'Angels One Five'. Here Pimpernel squadron pilots pile out of the Officers' Mess in a 1951-style scramble after a call on the 'Tannoy' to come to readiness. The scene immediately preceding this one, depicting the interior of the Mess, was not filmed at Kenley but at a studio mock-up at Elstree with the cut coming as the camera switches to this outdoor shot. *Above right:* Twenty-nine years later, the Mess is a sorry mess. Abandoned by the RAF in the 1960s, it now awaits conversion to a Home Office radio research centre. Patched up damage from the bombing in 1940 is still visible on the stonework.



Above left: With a raid on the station imminent, Jack Hawkins playing Group Captain 'Tiger' Small, the Station Commander, dashes from 'RAF Neethley Station HQ' in a race with Pilot Officer 'Septic' Baird (John Gregson) for the sole remaining practise flight Hurricane. *Above right:* No chance of a scramble here — now occupied by the Coldstream Guards NAAFI! The Army now use the married quarters at Kenley for an overflow from the Caterham depot.

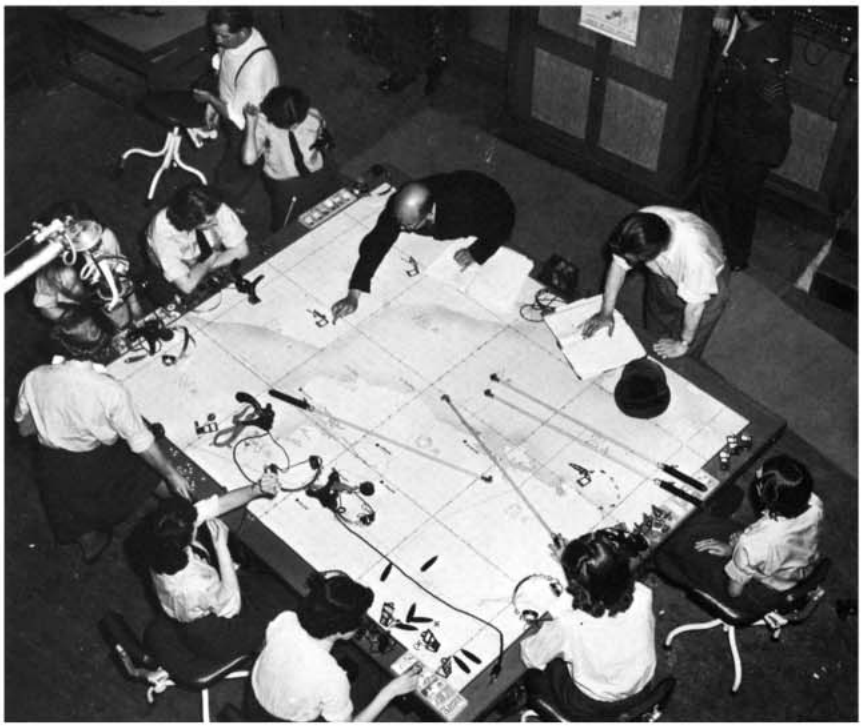
Above left: One well-remembered scene is the altercation between Jack Hawkins and Peter Jones (now a comedian on television), the sentry to the Operations Room, who denies the station commander entry without identification. Location for this shot was outside the actual Sector Operations Block used in the Battle of Britain although the interior was a studio construction. The assistant director, Gordon Scott, directing the scene, stands in front of the WAAF Corporal. The boom operator is Danny Daniels and the sound mixer sitting on the embankment is 'Dickie' Bird. *Top right:* When we first visited Kenley to match this picture, history had largely stood still for nearly thirty years. *Above and below right:* However, within just six weeks, demolition work was under way and by the time you read this, the ops block will be no more.

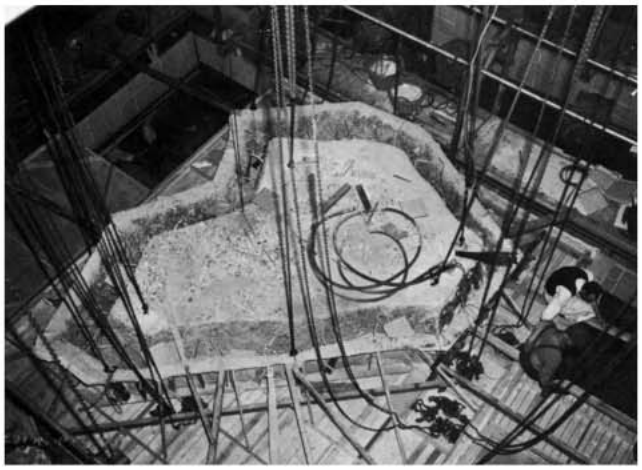
Three WRAFs serving at Kenley, Corporal Jean Hulme and Aircraftwomen Olive Daykin and Edith Vine were 'co-opted' by the Associated British Picture Corporation (which disappeared in 1969) to appear in the film, although none had any acting experience, and other airmen were called in as extras in crowd scenes.

Surprisingly, the provision of authentic aircraft of the correct period was as much a headache in 1951 as it was in *Battle of Britain* eighteen years later. A nationwide search revealed only two Hurricanes, both veterans of the battle: L1592, which appears in a static role as US-N, and P2617 which flies as US-B — the codes of No. 56 Squadron during the battle, re-numbered No. 1320 in the film. (The former Hurricane is now in the Science Museum and the latter at the RAF Battle of Britain Museum at Hendon.) Then, as in 1969, the film company looked to the Iberian Peninsula to make up the numbers as they discovered that the Portugese Air Force still flew Hurricanes operationally. Admittedly these were cannon-armed versions but five were flown to Britain where they were repainted, the four cannons removed and the ports altered to simulate an eight-gun fighter. Based at Kenley, the film company really did not make the most of their opportunity of having half-a-dozen airworthy Hurricanes flying at the same time and there is a minimum of air battle scenes in the film. Air-to-air shots were filmed from an Anson but models were used for combat sequences merged with original footage and film shot with a cockpit section in the studio.

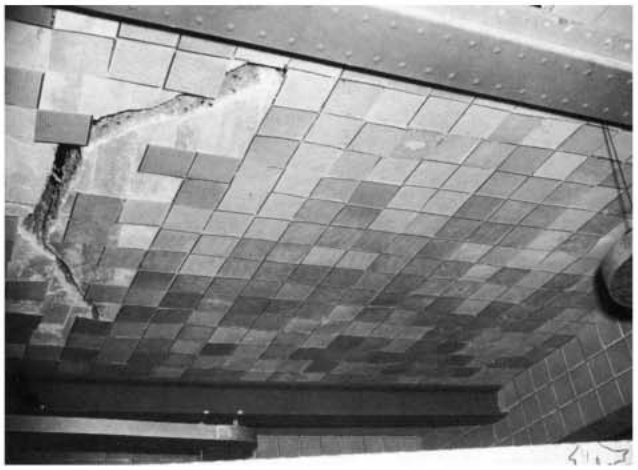
The German Messerschmitt Bf 110 'shot down' by Pilot Officer 'Septic' Baird (played by John Gregson) is reputed to have been diverted from its journey to the scrap heap

Above: **The interior of the ops room was built at Elstree. Michael Denison portrayed the Neethley Sector Controller, Squadron Leader Peter Moon, and, although the film company put out that the station was fictitious, it replaced the exact position of Biggin Hill on the ops table map!** *Below:* **Wing Commander A. J. C. Pelham-Groom, who wrote the original story for the film and also acted as technical advisor, is seen here arranging symbols on the table. George More O'Ferrall consults the script.**





For the bombing scene, reminiscent of what happened to the Biggin Hill Ops block on August 31, 1940, part of the ceiling was specially constructed so that it could be dropped on chains.



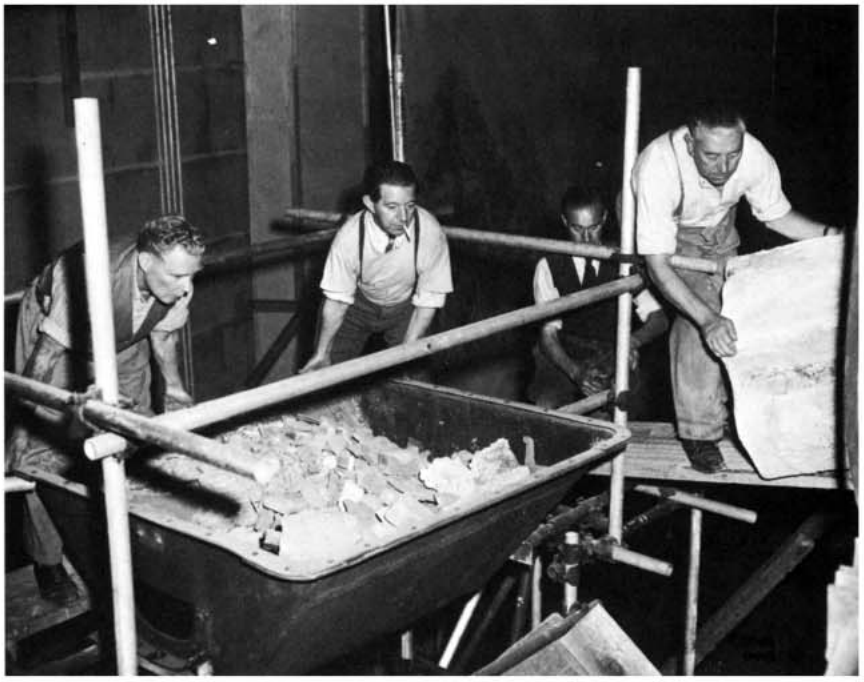
Studio hands were ready to tip polystyrene 'rubble' through the hole for additional effect. This was a one-off shot which had to go right first time and was thoroughly rehearsed.

and close examination of the stills reveals that it was in poor shape supported on trestles.

The fictitious aerodrome of Neethley is an amalgam of Kenley and Biggin Hill during the battle and naturally, like all Battle of Britain films, there has to be the bombing-of-the-ops-room-scene. Although the exterior of the original pre-war Kenley Sector Operations Room is seen in the film, the bombing scene was mocked up at Elstree studios where a large section of detachable ceiling on chains was dropped at the appropriate moment to crush the ops table. Traditionally, the ops room then moves into a local shop as both Biggin and Kenley ops rooms did in 1940 (see *The Battle of Britain — Then and Now* — sorry for the plug! — Ed).

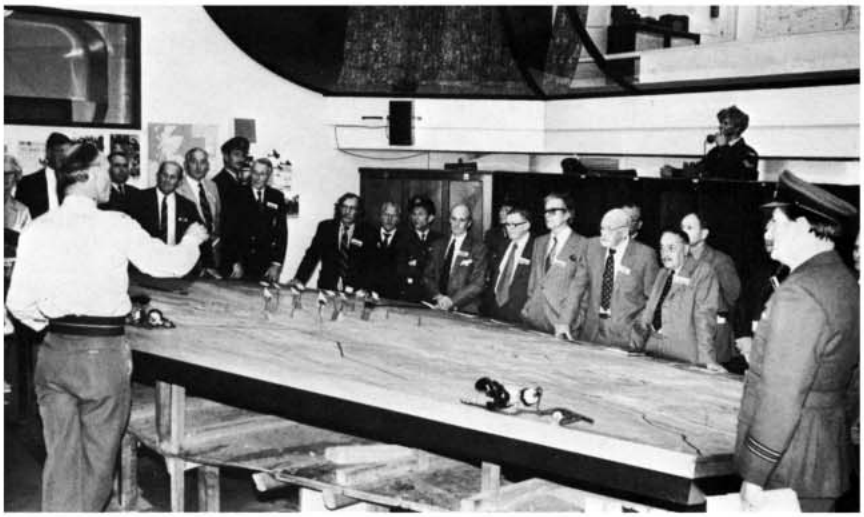
The original title for the film was to be *Hawks in the Sun* but it was thought that this sounded too much like a desert film and so the title was changed to *Angels One Five* — meaning height fifteen thousand feet in Battle of Britain jargon — which seemed more descriptive. The original timetable was to release the film on August 4 for screening during Battle of Britain week 1951 but the lateness of spring that year meant shooting could not start until trees were in leaf in July. Consequently its release was put back to March 1952.

When it did appear, it received mixed reviews from the media. Reg Whitley praised it as an 'outstanding British film which tells, with brilliant realism, a true story of what went on at an RAF fighter station in south-east England during the Battle of Britain'. However, appearing just three years after the classic *Twelve O'Clock High* (see *After the Battle* No. 20), it was inevitable that reviewers

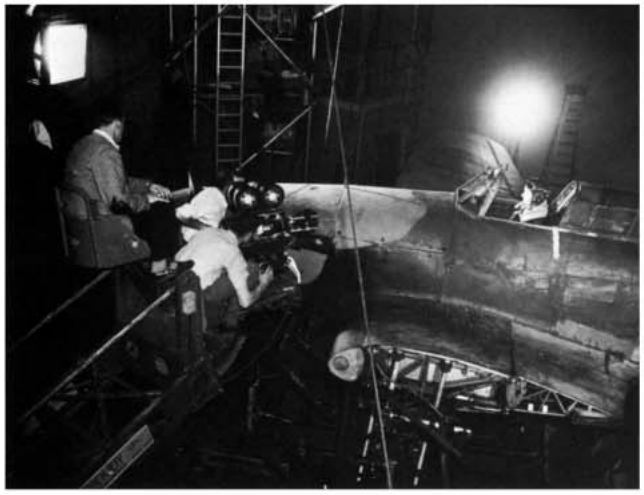


By the time the scene was set up, director George More O'Ferrall had gone to lunch leaving his assistant, Gordon Scott, in charge. Gordon had a revolver to signal to everyone the three parts of the action. The first was to indicate light dust; the second for the WAAFs to get under cover and the third for the big drop. After several rehearsals, the time came to shoot for real. Gordon then astounded everyone, and galvanised actors and prop men into double quick time by firing all three shots in quick succession!

Sector operations are then transferred in the film to a shoe-shop, the 'South Suburban Co-operative Society Ltd'. The interior *(above)* was another studio set. Here Freddie Francis, the camera operator, flashes a smile at George More O'Ferrall, seated opposite. Director of Photography, Chris Challis, stands beside him while Wing Commander Pelham-Groom consults the book of words.



Centre: However, the Group Operations room was authentic being filmed in the No. 11 Group Ops room at RAF Uxbridge. Ronald Adam *(above)* played the unnamed Group Controller. Luckily the scoreboard on the wall, listing all the aircraft claimed by the Group during the war, does not appear in the film. In 1975 an RAF serving officer, Flight Lieutenant Michael Cooke, and his No. 9 Signals Unit restored the room to its 1940 configuration. *Left:* Here a party of ex-Northolt RAF personnel have its former use explained to them during a visit in September 1980.



One Hurricane (fictitiously serialled P2617) was used at Elstree for studio shots — either in the close-ups of pilots 'in the air' *(above left)* or for 'Septic' Baird's crash into Squadron Leader Barry Clinton's house at the end of the runway *(above right)*.

Unfortunately, even though the film had so many RAF types in the cast and crew, there were several technical clangers. 'C1' fuselage roundels (1942-47 period) appear on Hurricanes in several shots filmed early on in the production until obviously someone realised the mistake and had them changed to the correct 'A' type of the period — see *above* and Page 12. *Below:* Our RAF uniform expert also points out the B3 American flying jacket; 1942-pattern Mae-Wests, 1941-pattern flying boots and Mk VII goggles. Note the trestles propping up the Bf 110 — provenance and subsequent fate unknown.

would contrast the two productions. Star Man's Diary said it couldn't be compared with *Twelve O'Clock High* and that the film makers hadn't quite succeeded in making a film worthy of the great theme. Another wrote that 'it does not compare in command and accomplishment with *Twelve O'Clock High*' and yet another that 'it cannot be compared with America's *Twelve O'Clock High* or Britain's wartime air pictures'. American newspapers were even unkinder. *New York Times:* 'A cluttered story, rambling and diffuse. It is not the most memorable drama about 'The Few''. *Herald Tribune:* 'It is unfortunate that the character portrayed by Gregson has become a cliche of war melodrama — the studios' stiff upper lip, the ironic reserve, the tumbling adolescent mirth of pilots at play'.

Today, when the film makes its occasional appearance on television, it obviously appears dated. We can understand this form of presentation, typical of British films in the 1950s, but one reviewer hit the nail on the head when he wrote in March 1952 that: 'The pattern of the RAF film was fixed during the war. *The First of The Few, Target for Tonight* and *The Way to the Stars* set the tone. They blended boyish camaraderie, devotion to duty, understatement and simple heroism. *Angels One Five* does not deviate a single whirl of a propeller from this formula. Every character does exactly what is expected of him in exactly the expected manner. It suffers chiefly from being about seven years too late'.

How the dogfight scenes were done. Shots of models 'flown' on wires in the studio, filmed against a cloudscape background, are intercut with clips of the real Hurricanes. George Blackwell in the dark jacket was the special effects miniatures man. *Below:* **How the camera sees it. Model shots always lack realism.**

The Last Flight of the only Battle of Britain VC

BY ANDY SAUNDERS

Almost a hundred miles east of Calcutta at 12.46 a.m. on the night of May 1, 1945, eight Liberators took off from Salboni laden with 500lb bombs and headed out over the Bay of Bengal towards Bangaduni Island on the first leg of their journey to Rangoon. The aircraft were from No. 355 Squadron which had for some time been committed to long-range attacks against Japanese positions prior to the planned British invasion of Rangoon and the raids often involved a gruelling 2,000-mile round trip. The Commanding Officer had taken the unprecedented step of telling the entire squadron the targets that were to be attacked (normally only aircrews were informed) and that a round-the-clock assault against Rangoon was to be launched.

Taking the lead was KH210, R for Robert, flown by Squadron Leader Gerald de Souza and manned by an experienced crew. It was their second raid of the day on Rangoon. Also on board was Wing Commander James Nicolson who had asked to come along as an observer.

In England, the name of Flight Lieutenant Nicolson had become famous as the only Battle of Britain VC. *(The story is told in The Battle of Britain — Then and Now. Ed.)* Still in his mid-twenties, in 1942 he was posted as Station Commander to Alipore, Calcutta, and he had since been in command of No. 27 (Fighter) Squadron based at Agartala, Parashuram and Cholavarum. Now in charge of training at Headquarters, South East Asia Air Force, he was spending some time with No. 355 Squadron studying the results of aircrew training operationally. At home Nicolson had been selected as prospective Conservative candidate at York in the election to be held at the end of the war and he had a wife and 4½-year old son awaiting his return. He was not to contest the seat or see his family again.

Up on the flight deck, Squadron Leader de Souza confidently piloted the lumbering bomber through the dark tropical night. With him was his second pilot, Warrant Officer Michael Pullen, and Wing Commander Nicolson. For two hours the flight was uneventful with each of the eleven crew going about his tasks. The flight engineer, Flight Sergeant Donald Cameron, watched his engines and fuel consumption; navigator Pilot Officer Jack Spillard plotted R for Robert's position; gunners Flight Sergeant Eric Kightley and Sergeants Robert Bell, Laurence

Top: **Liberator KH210, R for Robert, on a flight to Rangoon. The black and white vertical stripes on the rudders were No. 355 Squadron's identification marks.**

Above: **The pilot was Squadron Leader Gerald Anthony de Souza, aged 31, believed to be the only Indian to command an RAF flight.** *Right:* **Some of the crew of KH210 off duty. L-R: Flight Sergeant Robert Taylor Bell, RAF(VR) aged 21; Warrant Officer Michael Pullen (who survived the crash), Warrant Officer Ferguson (not on fatal flight), Flight Sergeant Donald Urquhart Cameron RAF(VR), aged 20; Flight Sergeant Eric Kightley (survivor) and Sergeant Laurence Helsby, RAF(VR), aged 21. Lying in the boat is Flight Sergeant Donald Tofft Nicolson of the RAAF, aged 25.**

Helsby and Flying Officer John Calland quartered the sky for enemy fighters; wireless operators Flight Sergeants Sam Doherty and Donald Nicolson (no relation) were at their stations, whilst the bomb aimer, Flying Officer Brian Hill, waited for the run-up to the target.

Then, shortly before 2.45 a.m., came the first indication of trouble when it was reported that the starboard outer engine was on fire. Efforts were made to extinguish the blaze — without success — and almost immediately problems arose with the starboard inner. With both starboard engines out of action, prospects were bleak. The bomb-load was jettisoned, followed by any unnecessary equipment. Still the aircraft lost height . . . with land some 100 miles away, ditching was inevitable.

De Souza ordered each man to his ditching station and prepared for the daunting task of setting the aircraft down on the sea, a formidable problem even for a pilot of his experience. His aircraft was flying with one wing low and it was dark. It was also a sombre fact that the Liberator was not the best of planes for a ditching — even given perfect conditions — for the construction of the bomb-bay doors was such that they tended to collapse on hitting the water so that there was no buoyancy. In fact, the floating time for a Liberator was given as fifteen seconds, so once the aircraft hit the sea the crew knew they had to move fast.

As they went to their stations the crew remained calm. Each man knew exactly what to do and Nicolson helped all he could to prepare for the ditching. Possibly the last man to see him alive was Flight Sergeant Eric Kightley, the nose gunner, when he exchanged a cheery thumbs-up sign with Nicolson who was still on the flight-deck as Kightley passed through to the rear of the aircraft to wait for the impact.

At 2.50 a.m., R for Robert struck the sea violently and immediately broke up, much of the wreckage sinking instantly and probably taking with it several of the crew.

Shortly after his release from hospital in 1940, James Nicolson, VC and his wife take their baby son for a walk in Kirkby Wharfe, Yorkshire.

Eric Kightley had been lucky to survive the crash. Finding himself in the water, he attempted to inflate his life jacket but his right wrist had been injured and he was unable to operate the inflation lever so he tried to inflate it through the mouth tube — only to discover that air was escaping from the bladder. Peering into the darkness he spotted the nose-wheel of the aircraft floating nearby and, as he hastily tied the tapes of his life jacket to it, he became aware of men in the water around him and realised that three others had also escaped. One was Warrant Officer Pullen, the second pilot, and the other Kightley thought was Flight Sergeant Helsby, the rear gunner. The third man could have been James Nicolson, but he was unable to be sure. When he shouted to the others that he had a wheel to cling on to they did not respond. Helsby was clinging to a wooden box and Pullen just swam away.

After seeing the rest of the aircraft from his squadron returning overhead, Eric Kightley began to give up hope. He had been in the water several hours when he saw with horror that shark fins were heading towards him. Recalling that sharks hated vibrations, he beat the sea violently with his good hand and waited for what he felt was certain death.

Next, bang on cue, the Americans appeared on the scene in two Catalina flying boats, evidently alerted to the area by Warrant Officer Nicolson's frantic 'Mayday' call which he had continued to transmit right up to the moment of impact. The first one landed to pick him up but almost drowned him in the process when its float hit the wheel to which he was tied and pushed him underwater. Coming to the rescue, one of the American crewmen produced a large knife, severed the tapes and hauled him aboard. The second Catalina landed and picked up Pullen but no trace could be found of Helsby or any other survivors. Kightley heard that several days later two bodies were found in the area of the crash and one was later identified as Doherty.

Safe in a Calcutta hospital, Kightley was curious to know why Pullen had not responded to his shouts and he asked him why he did not swim and join him as he clung to the nose-wheel. Pullen said he must have been suffering from hallucinations after the crash because he felt sure he could see two Indians in a rowing boat and each time he tried to climb into the non-existent boat the Indians rowed faster!

Whilst the two men recuperated, they were able to reflect on their ordeal and came to the conclusion that the fire may have been the result of enemy damage sustained on the first Rangoon raid that day. Because of the quick turn-round after the raid, a thorough inspection of the aircraft which might have revealed possible damage was, perhaps, not carried out.

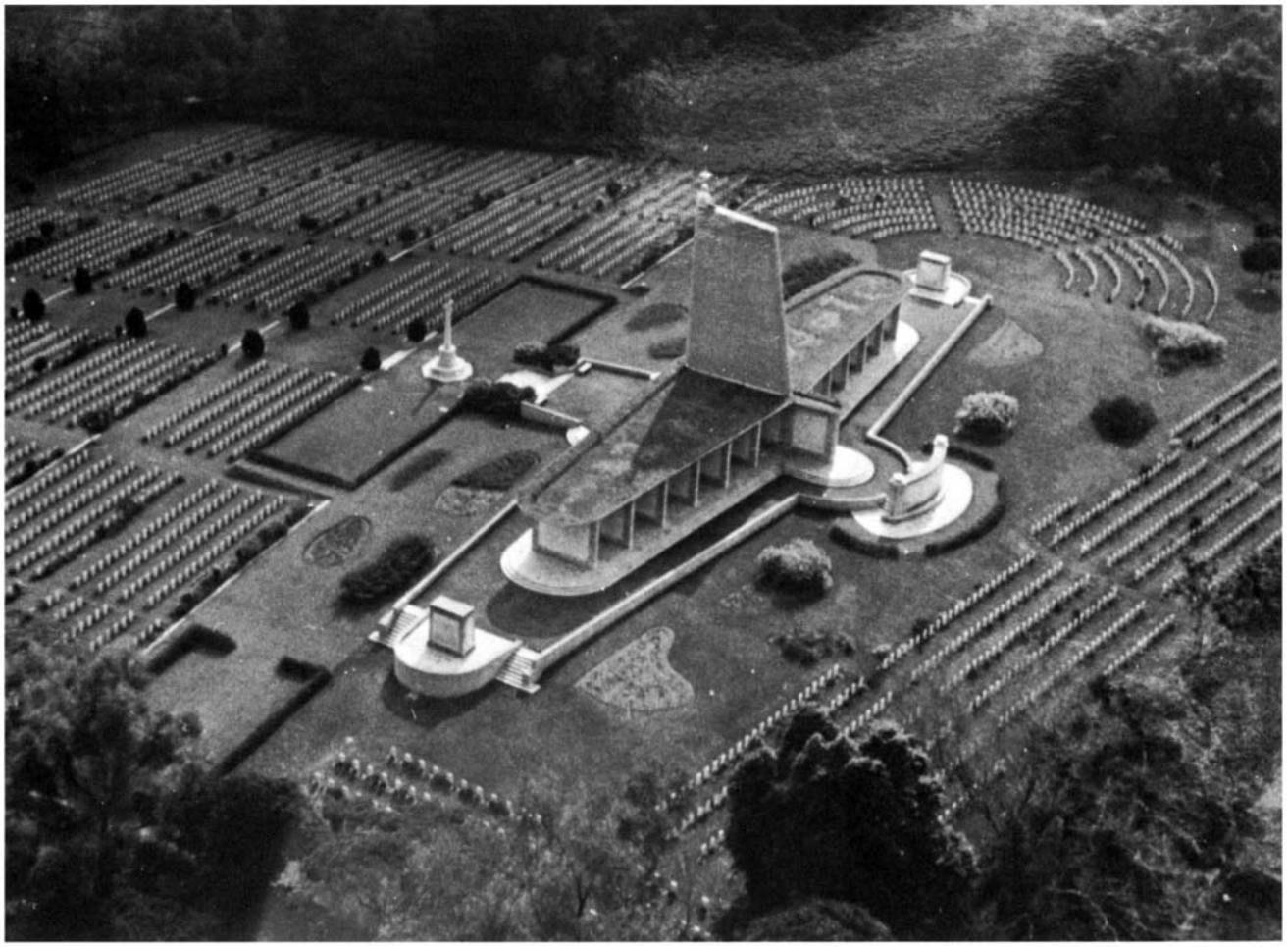
Pullen's injuries were consistent with being thrown out through the perspex canopy and as Nicolson was on the flight deck with him he may have been the fourth man in the water. To Kightley and Pullen there was no way of knowing — because of the almost total disintegration of the aircraft it could have been any one of the others. Apart from Doherty, no trace of any of the remainder of the crew or of Wing Commander Nicolson was ever found.

Whilst he was in command of No. 27 Squadron, Nicolson had been awarded the DFC 'for consistently showing himself to be a courageous and enterprising leader', but he had yet to be decorated. When Mrs. Muriel Nicolson had accompanied her husband to Buckingham Palace for the award of his Victoria Cross on November 25, 1940, it had been a brief yet moving occasion which they had celebrated afterwards as a family in the warmth of public feeling for the heroism of 'The Few'. On the second occasion, the war having run its course across the far side of the world, his widow returned with her young son to the Palace to receive his DFC where, almost exactly six years before, she had watched with pride as the King had pinned the supreme award for gallantry onto her husband's tunic.

The crew members of R for Robert who died, and their illustrious passenger, are commemorated on the Singapore Memorial except for Flight Sergeant Sam Doherty who is buried in Calcutta (Bhowanipore) Cemetery, India.

Warrant Officer Mick Pullen, the second pilot on the night of the crash, died of a heart attack in 1972 whilst playing golf near his home in Australia and it has only been due to the assistance of the other survivor, Eric Kightley, that this story of Wing Commander Nicolson's last flight can now be told.

The Singapore War Memorial lies in Kranji War Cemetery. Begun by prisoners-of-war, it was greatly enlarged in 1946 by the Army Graves Service by the concentration there of graves from Changi and later from Saigon Military Cemetery in French Indo-China and Bidadari Christian Cemetery in Singapore. Here are commemorated nine of the crew of R for Robert — Wing Commander Nicolson's name is on Column 445. No road comes near the cemetery and no traffic disturbs its peace. It was announced in the London Gazette on August 11, 1944 that James Nicolson (then an Acting Wing Commander) had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. However, at that time he was serving in the Far East and in May 1945 was with HQ Royal Air Force Burma. The award was posthumously presented to his widow, Mrs. Muriel Nicolson, at a Buckingham Palace investiture on October 29, 1946.



THE JEREMIAH O'BRIEN

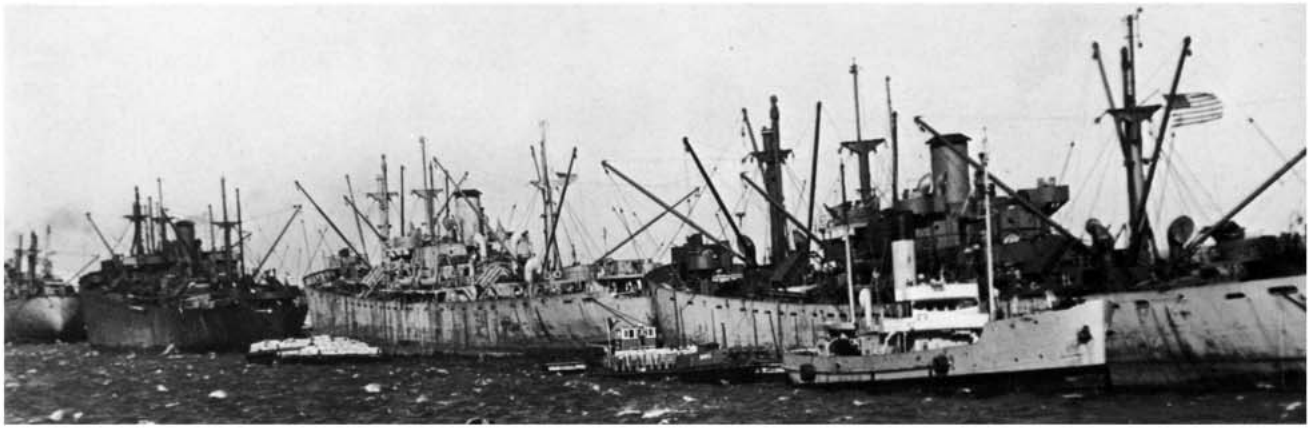
Probably the most unusual piece of war material to be preserved recently is the last Liberty ship to exist in its original Second World War configuration. Nicknamed 'Ugly Ducklings', Liberty ships comprise the largest single class of ships ever built throughout the world and, manned mostly by merchant seamen, carried all kinds of wartime cargo including food, fuel, ammunition and weapons in every theatre of war.

The Liberty ship was an emergency response to the critical shortage of wartime cargo vessels and was a product of standardised design and mass production. The design was based on the time-proven British tramp steamer which originated in 1879. Plans of the British ships were obtained from Sunderland and the New York naval architects Gibbs and Cox, together with the US Maritime Commission, adapted these to produce a standard Liberty ship of 441ft 6in in length, 56ft 10¾ in beam with a draft of just over 27 feet. The deadweight tonnage was 10,920 allowing a cargo of 9,146 tons to be carried with a full load of fuel. The standard hull was designated EC-2 — 'E' standing for 'emergency'; 'C' for 'cargo' and '2' indicating a large capacity.

The ships had a single screw and were propelled by a GMC 2500 ihp reciprocating engine located amidships giving a speed of ten knots. The standard carrier had five cargo holds, three forward and two aft of the machinery space. Cargo handling was by steam winches and booms stepped at the masts and at a centre-line kingpost. Salt water ballast or dry cargo could be carried in deep tanks provided in Nos. 1 and 4 holds. Frequently the ships carried more than their intended 9,146-ton cargo with deck loads of aircraft or tanks, crated aircraft or trucks, heavy machinery or locomotives, loading them down to beyond their Plimsoll lines.

The first Liberty, the SS *Patrick Henry*, was launched on September 27, 1941 and the emergency building programme accelerated rapidly after the entry of the United States into the war in December with women eventually comprising over thirty per cent of the shipbuilding force. The all-welded construction was a significant accomplishment in engineering design and the ships were built to a high standard of performance for the time, bearing in mind the conditions of the wartime emergency. Because many of the parts were prefabricated before final assembly, a record time for construction of a Liberty ship was set on the *Robert E. Peary* of four days! The keel

Top: **June 19, 1943 at the New England Shipbuilding Corporation, South Portland, Maine saw the launch of the SS Jeremiah O'Brien — one of the 2,700-odd Liberty ships constructed during WWII.** *Below:* **Libertys 'in action'. In 1944, the Jeremiah O'Brien made at least eleven round trips between Southampton and the Normandy beachhead transporting troops, ammunition and vehicles and also carried some of General Patton's troops from Belfast to become the famed US Third Army in France (IWM).**



was laid on November 8, 1942 and, within twenty-four hours, the hull had taken shape and the 135-ton engine put in place. By the end of the second day, the upper deck was finished and on the third day the deckhouses, masts and other equipment had been installed ready for final welding, wiring and painting on the fourth. Three days later she was in operation. However, the average time for construction was just over three months and by 1943 vessels were being completed at the rate of three per day.

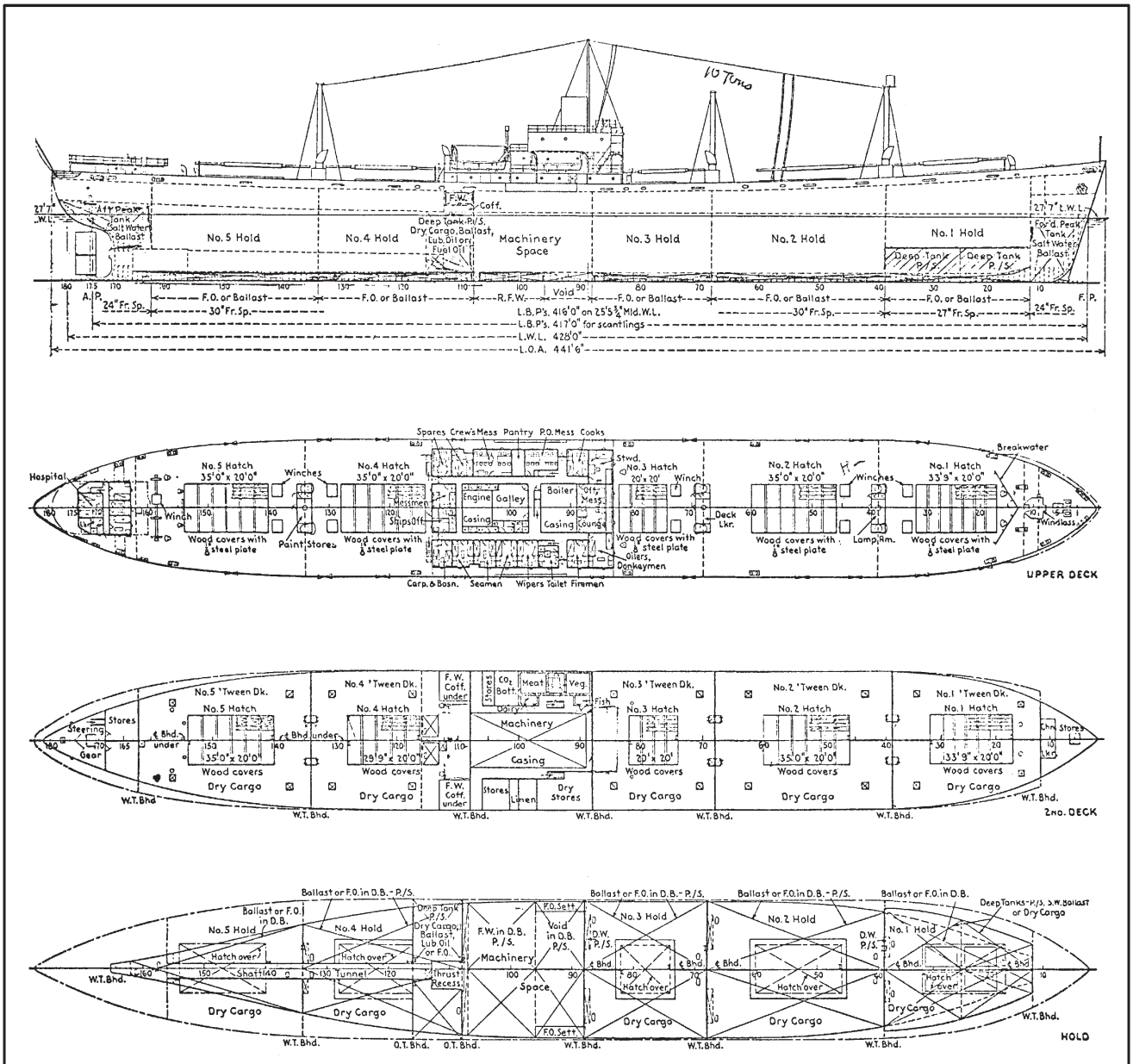
The ultimate quantity produced by the eighteen entirely new Liberty shipyards with their 500 sub-contractors is a matter of dispute. The official figure totals 2,751 but the American Bureau of Shipping records 2,742 ships with other sources claiming a lesser number of 2,708. The ABS total is broken down into 2,580 regular EC-2 ships, sixty-two Z-ET1-S-C3 tankers, sixty Ocean-class vessels built for Great Britain (nicknamed Limey Libertys), twenty ZEC2-S-C5 aircraft transports, twelve EC-2-S-AW1 colliers and eight ZEC2-S-C2 tank carriers. A few were converted later for use as hospital ships. The last ship delivered was the SS *Albert H. Boe* on October 30, 1945.

In the main, Libertys were operated by more than eighty different steamship companies with a crew of forty-four although some were manned by naval personnel and used to supply landings or sunk to form breakwaters for beach invasions such as the 'gooseberries' off the Normandy coast. The cargo carriers were armed for defence, the addition of the naval gun crews of ten or twenty men making the quarters very cramped. It is estimated that more than 200 were lost by enemy action, many others surviving attacks with varying amounts of damage.

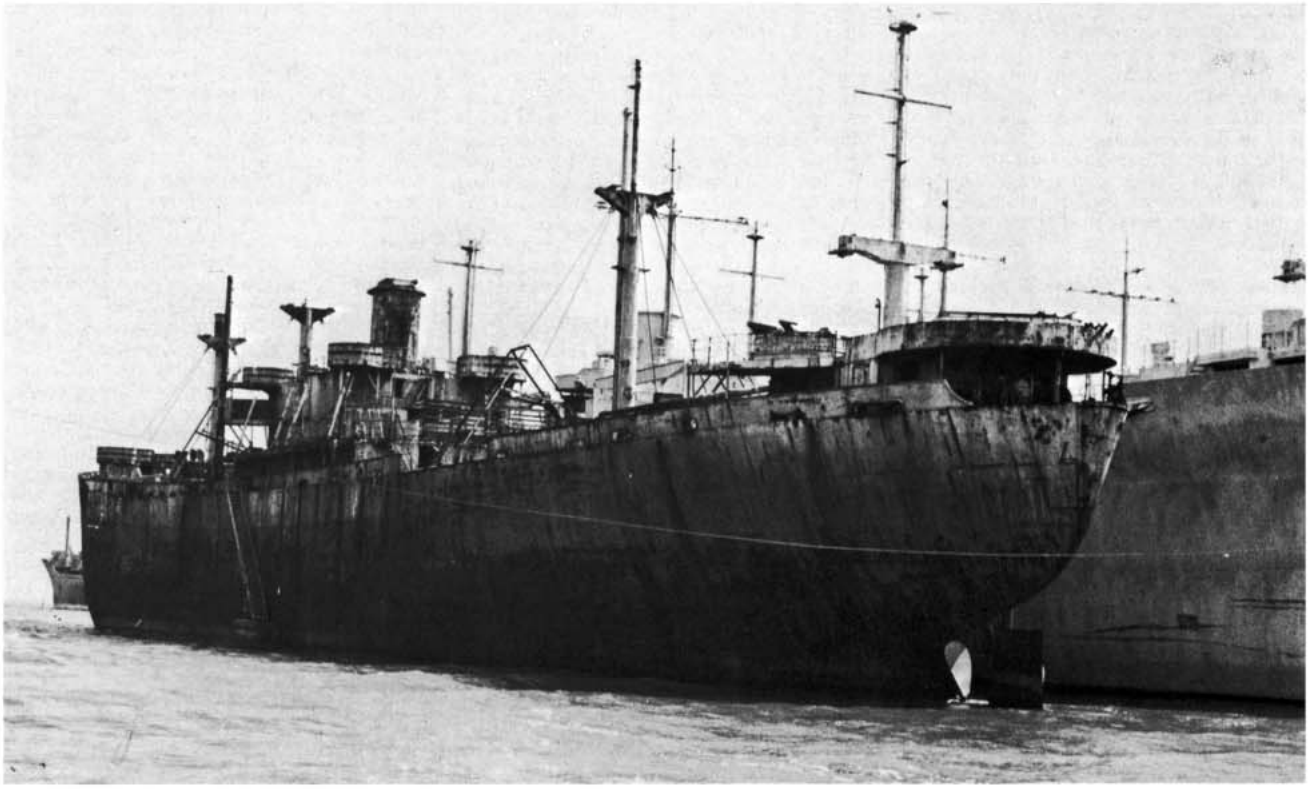
Following the end of World War II, many Libertys were sold to shipping lines around the world and, for the next twenty years, formed the backbone of the world's tramp ship fleet. Many were cut in half and stretched sixty to eighty feet to provide more cargo space, the modification improving the longtitudinal stability and also increasing the speed. Over the years many went for scrap, some were sunk to create artificial reefs to improve fishing grounds, and yet others used by the US Navy for its missile tracking programme as radar picket ships and as repair depots.

A nucleus of ships were mothballed with the US Reserve Fleet at Suisan Bay thirty miles north of San Francisco in 1946. The Libertys there saw use as emergency storage space for the bumper US grain harvests in the 1950s and were drafted into action during the Korean War and again on the closure of the Suez canal when an emergency call went out for additional cargo shipping. Suez was the Liberty ship's final debut — the cargo carrying chore for later episodes such as Vietnam being taken over by the Victory ships.

In the 1960s, Liberty ships were being sold in increasing numbers for scrap and by 1967 only one ship remained mothballed at Suisan Bay — the *Jeremiah O'Brien* — named after a privateer in the American War of Independence (War of the American Revolution to Americans) who disrupted British shipping and won the first naval battle of that war in June 1775. It was Thomas J. Patterson Jr, the western regional director of the US Maritime Administration, who had the foresight (and,



PROFILE AND DECK PLANS OF A LIBERTY-TYPE CARGO SHIP



The Jeremiah O'Brien in 1978, mothballed with the reserve fleet at Suisun Bay, California.

fortunately, the authority) to set aside the *Jeremiah O'Brien* so that she would not go to the breakers' yard.

The vessel had been constructed as MCE Hull 806 by the New England Shipbuilding Corporation at South Portland, Maine. The keel was laid on May 6, 1943 and she was launched on June 19 — a building time of forty-four days. After a short dock trial on the morning of June 28 she was given a manoeuvring trial in Portland Harbour on the 30th before being delivered to the US War Shipping Administration to be operated on their behalf by Grace Line Incorporated. She is known to have carried ammunition and grain between America and the United Kingdom and Continent and returned to the United States in 1946 for a voyage to Australia. In November 1946 she was handed over to the Army for conversion into a hospital ship but the work was never carried out and the *O'Brien* was mothballed at Suisan Bay. By 1966 she was an ideal choice for preservation as, not only was she still in her original configuration (many Libertys had to have reinforcing bands riveted to their hulls to overcome cracking of the welded hulls under strain), but she was still in excellent condition.

Although the groundwork for her preservation had been made so much easier by the action of Tom Patterson, it was ten years before his original concept began to get off the ground. By 1976 the Smithsonian Institution had given their blessing to the preservation of the *O'Brien* as a 'living museum' — a move which, said Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, 'made good sense rather than having to scour the ship breakers' yard for hulks at some later time as is too often the case'.

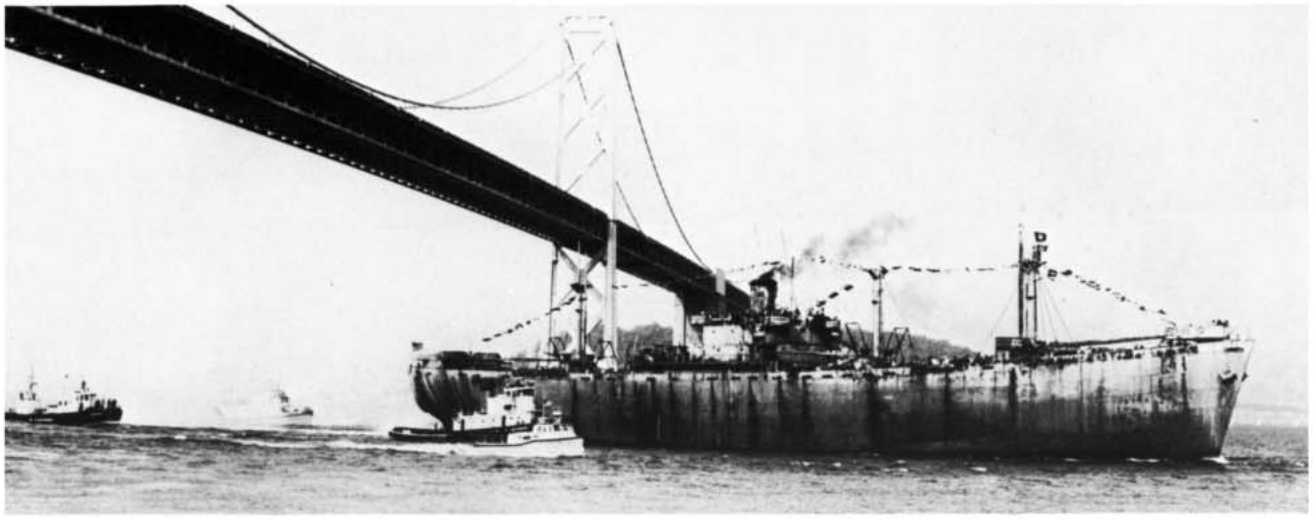
On July 7, 1978, the US Department of the Interior entered the vessel in the National Register of Historic Places — a measure which added material weight to Tom Patterson's efforts to preserve the ship. Thereafter things moved a lot faster. In September, Tom Patterson received a grant of $10,000 from the US National Trust for Historic Preservation and on November 9 the official preservation campaign was launched as the 'National Liberty Ship Memorial'. The aim of the organisation was to be the raising of additional funds to move the ship to a San Francisco Bay shipyard for complete restoration and subsequent permanent exhibition moored to Pier 3, Fort Mason, virtually in the shadow of the Golden Gate and the point of embarkation for many shiploads of troops and cargo during the war.

In addition to money, the Memorial Committee is soliciting interesting stories and personal experiences from crew members who served on or with Liberty ships which will then be published in a special souvenir publication. (Should readers wish to write to the Committee, the address is: National Liberty Ship Memorial, 215 Market Street, Suite 532-533, San Francisco, California 94105.)

It was estimated that $350,000 would be necessary to drydock, sandblast, paint and repair the ship and to repair or replace original equipment including the guns which were mounted on all Liberty ships.

Between January and May 1979, a dedicated team of volunteers began the job of

It was solely due to the personal interest of Thomas J. Patterson Jr, (left) the western regional director of the US Maritime Administration, that the ship was never converted or scrapped. In a rare case of a preservation-minded person also having the necessary authority, the Jeremiah O'Brien was set aside for ten years until funds for its restoration were available. In 1978, the 'National Liberty Ship Memorial' was created with Thomas B. Crowley (centre), President of the Crowley Maritime Corporation, as its National Chairman. Here he receives two cheques totalling $2,295 towards the fund from Henry 'Whitey'' Disley, President of the Marine Firemen's Union (Don Aron).



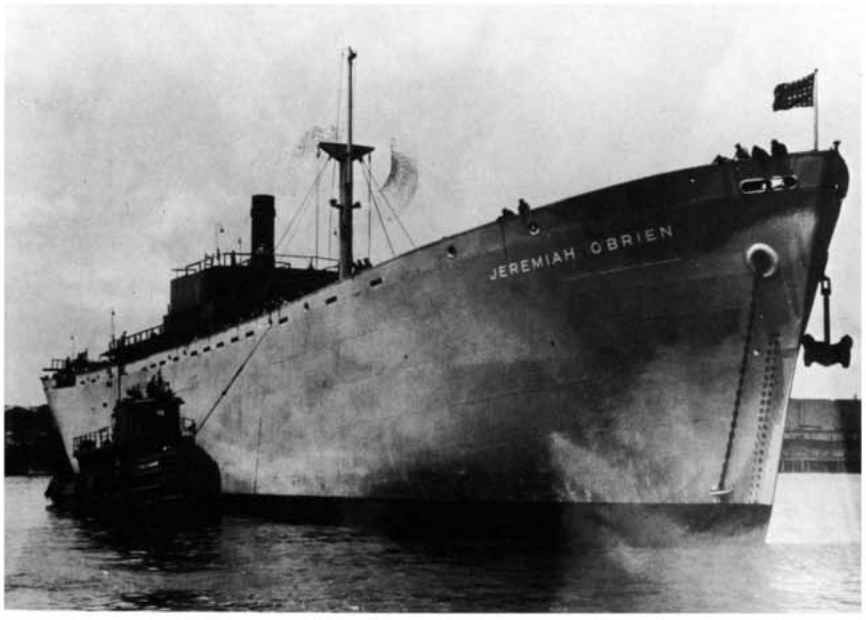
re-activating the *Jeremiah O'Brien* engine room which had remained silent since it was last shut down in 1946. By June 10 all was ready and on that Saturday, with over 500 people aboard, the last Liberty steamed out of the mothball fleet under her own power. Five hours later she arrived at the Bethlehem Steel Corporation shipyard in San Francisco. Watercraft of all shapes and sizes, sail and powered, escorted her and San Francisco's Mayor proclaimed the date as National Liberty Ship Day.

During the remainder of 1979, the accumulated marine growth of thirty-six years was scraped from her bottom and she was sandblasted and re-painted in World War II grey. Just before Christmas, the work began on the topside and the weekend of March 29-30, 1980 was set aside for a massed attack on restoring the interior. Volunteers from all walks of life in the Bay area — from the labor unions to former Liberty ship crews — were called upon to be assigned various tasks of cleaning, repairing and repainting.

This story is being written as the second day of that mammoth effort comes to a close. The final chapter in the story came on May 21, 1980 when the *Jeremiah O'Brien* undertook her last voyage from the shipyard to Pier 3. During the historic parade and dedication ceremony, held while the ship was under way across San Francisco Bay, wreaths were cast in memory of all the merchant seamen who have lost their lives at sea — a service which it is hoped will be held annually.

Above: **The ship was moved from Suisun Bay to the Bethlehem Steel Corporation Shipyard on October 6, 1979. Here she passes the San Francisco — Oakland Bay Bridge.**

Below left: **The ship was taken out of the water for the first time in thirty-six years in December 1979. After two weeks drydocking, the Jeremiah O'Brien was put back in the water** *(below)* **in readiness for the massive round-the-clock restoration programme.** *Above:* **California Maritime Academy cadets prepare to drop wreaths overboard just outside Golden Gate Bridge during the Seamen's Memorial Service — part of the recommissioning and dedication of the vessel as the National Liberty Ship Memorial held on May 21, 1980.** *Overleaf:* **Last journey for permanent berthing at Pier 3, Fort Mason in the new Golden Gate National Recreation Area.**



JEREMIAH O'BRIEN
PILOT

WARTIME WRECKS ON ST. KILDA

BY THE RIGHT REVEREND MONSIGNOR JOHN C. BARRY, DCL, MA, CHAIRMAN OF THE ST. KILDA CLUB.

The high priority given to the training of aircrew, both before and particularly after the Battle of Britain, made it necessary to find suitable training areas and bases far from the range of enemy planes. Facilities were made available overseas, notably in Canada, but the remoter regions of the north of Scotland were liberally scattered with Operational Training Unit and Ferry Training Unit bases. Not merely was this area far from German fighters, it was also lightly populated and, above all, the terrain lent itself well to navigational training with the high land masses, wide areas of ocean and the numerous islands, some low and flat, but the majority mountainous and rugged.

As a consequence, many thousands of training flights were made all over the north of Scotland and over the Atlantic Ocean to the west. And not surprisingly, they involved considerable risks. These arose firstly from the fact that many of the crews, particularly early in their training, were inexperienced and that, correspondingly, they made mistakes. Secondly, the weather was unpredictable and often showed itself fiercely hostile with its high winds, savage gales, low visibility and heavy cloud cover. One commanding officer of an FTU told me that it was 'sheer slaughter' on many occasions and, quite often, later in the war, he would phone the local radar station to ask them if they had a blip on their screen which didn't seem to belong to anybody and, if they had, to tell them how to get home. Some of the training stations had fearsome records in terms of crashes — two, three, even five a week.

Almost every land mass in the area of the Highlands and Islands has its wrecks. It is said that the island of Arran has sixteen. There are two within a hundred yards of each other on Braeriach and almost every island of the Hebrides has one or more. Not surprisingly, the islands of St. Kilda have three and the records show that many more aircraft crashed into the sea in the area.

St. Kilda is a group of islands and stacs in the North Atlantic, about fifty miles west of the Outer Hebrides. The main island is called Hirta. It is the only island which was inhabited but was evacuated in 1930. The cottages were left to fall into ruins until 1958 when National Trust for Scotland work parties began to go there in the summer. They have now roofed four of them and made them habitable. A fifth is planned. However, during World War II, the islands were entirely uninhabited. The other islands include Soay, the sheep island, to the north. It is almost completely inaccessible. To the south lies Dun, the breakwater island. Four miles to the north-east is Boreray.

Hirta, with its adjacent islands of Dun and Soay and innumerable stacs, is formed by two volcanic craters, each sloping into the sea, one to the north, Gleann Mhor and Glen Bay, the other to the south, forming Village Bay. With the exception of these two bays, the cliffs rise steeply and, in many cases, sheer from the sea. The highest points are Conachair, 1,397 feet high, Mullach Mhor separating the two craters, and Mullach Bi on the west wall, each 1,260 feet high.

These rugged, inhospitable islands presented a considerable hazard to aircraft, particularly as a result of their normal weather pattern. The warm air of the Gulf Stream rises as it reaches the cliffs and forms cloud and mist, so that in summer and winter the heights are often covered in cloud and, from the sea, the islands look as though they were flat and two or three hundred feet high. One ex-Wellington pilot tells of how he was flying just under cloud when suddenly he saw in front of him the awesome cliffs of Conachair, rising 1,200 feet sheer from the sea. He stood his Wellington bomber on its wing-tip and did the sharpest turn he had ever done, missing the cliffs by inches. This sort of experience must have befallen many pilots, so that it is surprising that only three planes actually crashed there.

My first visit to St. Kilda was with a National Trust for Scotland work party in 1974 but it was not until I returned as a party leader the next year that I really took in the fact that Hirta is literally strewn with aircraft wreckage. I was asked about this by members of my party and I had to confess almost total

Opposite: **Piece of Sunderland ML858.**

ignorance of the aircraft which crashed. Indeed, we thought that the wreckage was a blot on the landscape, and we thought among ourselves that it would be a good idea to clear it all away and throw it into the sea. This naive idea was put to the St. Kilda Club Committee and it was gently pointed out that it was part of the history and archaeology of the islands, and that it should therefore be left where it was.

My reaction to this was simple. If it was part of the history, who knew the history? I found that although there were people who knew some of the details, the full story was not known at all and was in danger of becoming lost for ever. It was then that I decided that somebody had better find out if possible, and preserve a record of the aircraft, of the crews who died on St. Kilda and of the circumstances of each crash.

The rest reads like a detective story. Other researchers joined the team; we examined records of the various RAF establishments in the area and, by means of BBC programmes and newspaper items (in one of which I was called 'the sleuth of St. Kilda'), we discovered people who were concerned with the wrecks and eventually succeeded in tracing the relatives to enable us to piece together the stories behind the crashes.

The Sunderland at the head of Gleann Mhor

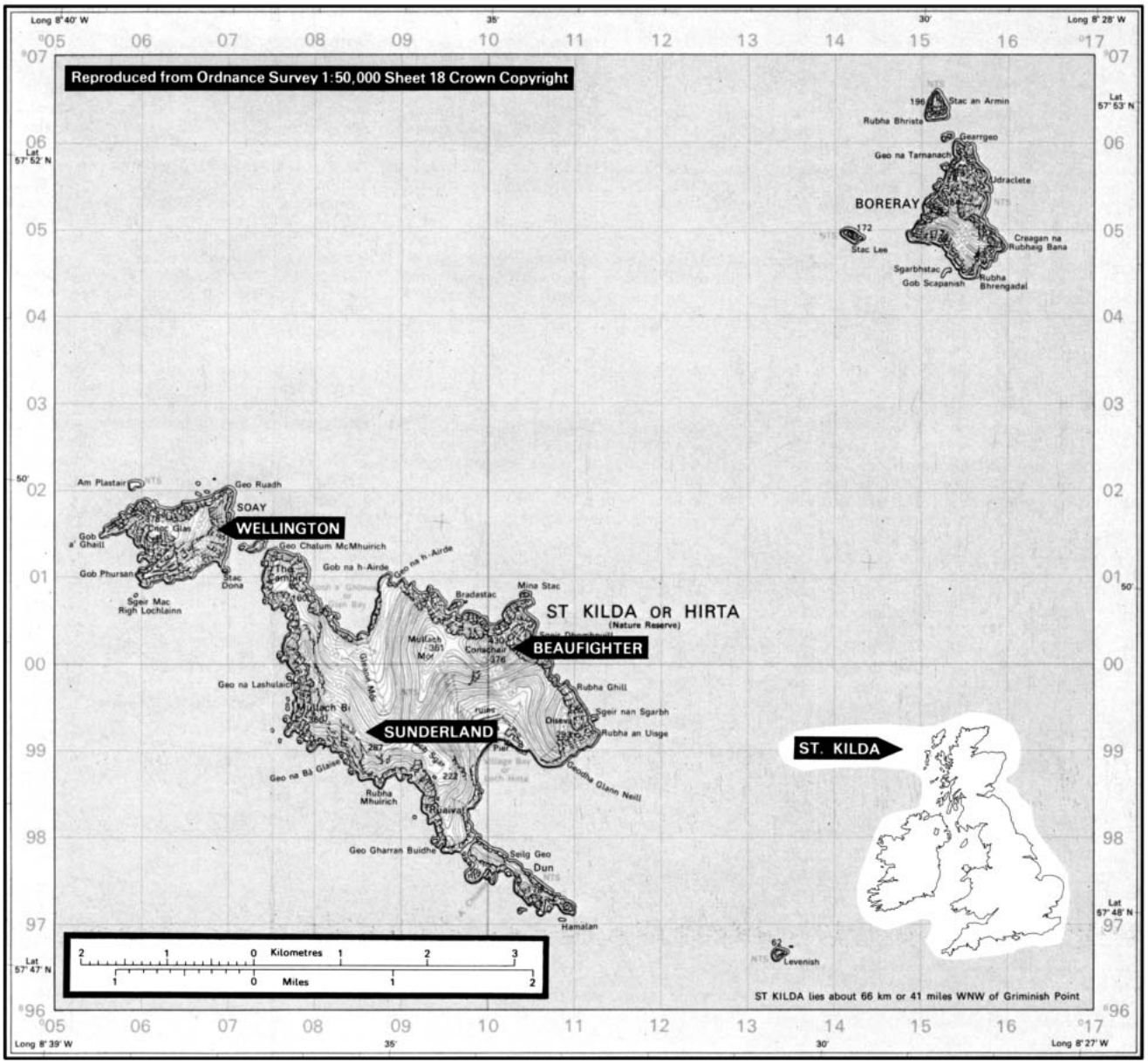
The first (and often the only) wreckage visited by the average person lies at the head of Gleann Mhor, just below the picturesquely, but inaccurately named Lovers' Stone, at a height of about 800 feet. There are four engines, four propellers, and a lot of wreckage, much of which has been moved about by curious hands or blown down the valley by the winter gales. Some of it has come to rest a mile from the crash site. There are no large sections. It is all in relatively small pieces and this has undoubtedly made its dispersal easier. The burn which drains Gleann Mhor is full of it, right down to the sea.

The wreckage belongs to a Sunderland flying boat, ML858, which was based at No. 302 Ferry Training Unit at Oban. (Nothing now remains of the base except the concrete ramp at Ganavan leading down into the sea and the steel rails built into the hangar floor, which carried the enormous doors.) The aircraft had been delivered there from Wig Bay, near Stranraer, on May 14, 1944. On May 22 its crew arrived at Oban for the final stage of their training. They had come together in February and March of that year and had spent three months together at No. 4 Operational Training Unit at Alness, on the Cromarty Firth. They had had their picture taken there before they were transferred to Oban.

The crew consisted of six New Zealanders, one Australian who had joined the New Zealand Air Force, and three Britishers. The captain of the aircraft was the senior pilot, NZ416200 Warrant Officer Cecil Osborne, from Ashburton, New Zealand. He had previously trained and flown in Catalina flying boats and had been posted to No. 490 (NZ) Squadron, based on Jui, near Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he had been in action against a German submarine. His training in Catalinas had been at both No. 4 OTU and 302 FTU. He was therefore familiar with the routine at both stations. He had completed 806 flying hours as a pilot.

The second pilot was NZ424552 Flying Officer Richard Ferguson, born at Te Kuiti in 1912, and a BA of Auckland University. A schoolteacher before his enlistment in 1942, he had trained (like many of the others) in Canada before going to Alness.

The navigator was NZ412767 Flying Officer William Thompson, born in 1914 in Christchurch, formerly chief clerk in an oil company, who enlisted in 1941 and trained in



Canada before going to Alness. He had married in October 1941.

The flight engineer was one of the three British members of the crew, 1608033 Sergeant Roy Lewis, from Sittingbourne, Kent. He was nineteen and the baby of the crew and had been training since he joined the RAF in 1942.

There were three wireless operators who also doubled as air gunners. The senior in rank was NZ41187 Warrant Officer John Lloyd, born in Wellington in 1921. He joined up in early 1940, training first as an air gunner and then in Radio Schools in the UK. While in this country he married an English girl, Muriel, who was pregnant at the time of his death.

The second wireless operator/air gunner was the oldest man in the crew, 760351 Flight Sergeant Bryan Bowker, of Stockport, Cheshire. He was thirty-three and since 1929 had worked in a bank in Knutsford. A keen radio enthusiast since his schooldays, he was a foundation member and treasurer of the Stockport Amateur Short-Wave Radio Society. In 1938 he joined the Civilian Wireless Reserve and was called up on August 29, 1939. After RAF training, he worked as an instructor in several Radio Schools but was so keen to fly that he managed to obtain a posting to Alness in February 1944. He was married, with two children.

The third wireless operator/air gunner, NZ404114 Flight Sergeant Oliver 'Ted' Reed, was an Australian, born in Brighton, Victoria, in 1918. At the age of twenty he came to New Zealand to work on the railways until he enlisted in 1940. After the usual training he was posted as wireless operator/air gunner to No. 269 Squadron in Iceland, flying in Hudsons. He completed about twenty operational sorties, mainly on anti-submarine sweeps and convoy escort duty, once as far as southern Norway. He was an instructor for some time in 1943 and went to Alness earlier than the others in December 1943.

There were three other air gunners. The oldest was NZ428043 Sergeant David Roulston, born in Hunterville in 1917, and, until he enlisted in 1942, employed as a salesman in his father-in-law's firm in New Plymouth. He married before he went to Canada to attend the gunnery schools in Manitoba and a daughter was born to his wife Sybil six months after he went overseas. Next was NZ428045 Sergeant Francis Robertson, one of four brothers who volunteered for service in the RNZAF, born in Takaka, Nelson, in 1920. He worked on his father's farm until he joined up in 1942, and was sent to Manitoba to train as an air gunner. The third was James Scoular Thomson, eldest of a family of five from Lanark in Scotland and barely twenty when he died.

After their training in Sunderlands at Alness, the whole crew were posted on May 22, 1944 to No. 302 FTU, Oban. Their new station commander was a flamboyant character, a Canadian called Wing Commander W. W. Campbell, OBE, DFC, who died in 1953. This was to be the final stage of their training. When the course, which was to last less than three weeks, was over, they would be posted for operational duties. Their maintenance base was at Ganavan but the crews were housed in the hotels in Oban. The Sunderland flying boats were usually moored off the island of Kerrera.

Most of them had not been on leave since February when they went up to Alness and, since there did not seem to be much prospect of leave before they went overseas, the two crew members whose wives lived in the United Kingdom sent telegrams asking them to travel up to Oban. So Mary Bowker put her two children into the care of her mother and travelled up from Stockport, while Muriel Lloyd, expecting her first baby and looking forward to her first wedding anniversary, came with her from Glasgow to be met by

The crew of the Sunderland photographed at Alness in 1944. Standing L-R: Sergeant Scoular Thomson, gunner; Sergeant Roy Lewis, flight engineer; Flight Sergeants Bryan Bowker and Oliver Reed, wireless operator/air gunners; and Sergeant David Roulston, air gunner. Sitting L-R: Warrant Officer John Lloyd, the senior wireless op/air gunner; Flying Officer Richard Ferguson, second pilot; Warrant Officer Cecil Osborne, captain and first pilot; Flying Officer Bill Thompson, navigator and Sergeant Francis Robertson, the third gunner.

almost the whole crew at Oban station. The fact that this crew were exceptionally united is referred to in several of the letters written after their deaths.

Mary Bowker had arranged to go back home on the night train on Wednesday, June 7, 1944. Before she left, her husband and the crew had left Oban for their very last training flight. They now knew their next posting. It was to North Africa on convoy escort duty. Nothing very exciting, perhaps, in fact, rather a cushy job with little or no risk attached to it and many of them had written home to say so. Their families had breathed a sigh of relief. Muriel Lloyd saw Mary off, as she intended to stay on for a further day or two.

The flight of ML858 was to be a night operational training flight and they were airborne at 2200 hours. Their flight plan was a familiar one: south to the island of Colonsay, then almost due north to Barra Head, then a turn north-west to St. Kilda and finally home to Oban. The aircraft was fully armed and would be prepared to attack any enemy craft sighted during the night.

When they took off the weather was not good, not that that was so very extraordinary, even in June. There was a shallow depression moving in slowly from the Atlantic, bringing with it low cloud, drizzle and very poor visibility above 300 or 400 feet. In effect this meant that all ground above that height would be invisible at a distance of more than about 500 to 800 yards. Indeed, some of the relatives say that the Sunderland was the only aircraft in the air that night. This may be true. However, such a weather pattern was common enough and it seems unlikely that it would stop all flying, especially since visibility below the cloud cover was relatively good.

They had to report by radio every hour on the hour. A normal report was received at 2300 that all was well but there was no report at midnight. The aircraft simply went off the air. Of course this did not necessarily mean anything more than a defective radio set and, since a Sunderland was a flying boat designed to land on the water, even if it had been forced down, there would be no danger since the sea was fairly calm that night. Indeed, the records of No. 302 FTU show that many Sunderlands did land on the sea and had to be towed back to base.

When the aircraft had not returned in the

Signatures on the back of Scoular Thomson's photograph.

morning, it was evident that something was amiss. A massive search was ordered and aircraft from all the local stations took part. Meanwhile Wing Commander Campbell came to the hotel where Mrs. Lloyd was staying and gave her the news personally.

The search was first directed towards the sea area to the west of the Outer Hebrides in expectation that the aircraft had landed on the sea although, quite early on, Group HQ expressed the fear that it had come to grief on St. Kilda. The search aircraft were in the air all that day and the next but they found nothing. They were much impeded by poor visibility, particularly over land. They extended their search area each day, while back at Oban telegrams were sent to the next of kin informing them that the crew were missing.

Eventually, in the early afternoon of Saturday, June 10, the weather cleared and three reports came in that aircraft wreckage had been sighted on the 'south-west corner' of Hirta: the first, at 0925, from a Warwick from No. 281 Squadron, Tiree; the second, at 1214, from an Oxford from Stornoway, piloted by the commanding officer, Wing Commander A. R. Leggate, and then from an Anson from Benbecula at 1430. At Leggate's request over the radio, a high speed launch was on its way from Stornoway even before he landed. By 1852 they had reached St. Kilda, climbed up to the ridge, found and identified the wreckage, reporting that they had found nine bodies.

There were ten men in the crew. The mention of nine bodies is perfectly understandable. They counted in a hurry and missed one. In fact all ten bodies were recovered three days later. But curious stories have arisen from the mention of only nine. One is that they expected only nine and the tenth was a stowaway, engaged on God knows what nefarious business. Another, recently published in a Scottish newspaper, is that the 'pilot' was not killed in the crash. With both legs broken, he is supposed to have dragged himself uphill, apparently lugging his parachute with him, crawled into one of the cleits (little dry-stone structures) and died, to be found there many years later. The story is false in almost every detail. The 'airman in the cleit' is a part of the St. Kilda folklore. So far we have been unable to trace any firm evidence of the occurrence. For what it is worth, it seems that the story emanates from an RAF flight sergeant, formerly attached to the air-sea rescue base at Connel Ferry, who said that he had been a member of a crew which recovered the body and that the dead airman had been a member of the crew of a crashed Hudson. There is in fact no known Hudson wreckage anywhere on the St. Kilda islands but the story of a dead man in a cleit, his legs broken and wrapped in his parachute, is entirely consistent with an aircraft going out of control and crashing into the sea with one of the crew baling out, landing awkwardly on the rough terrain of St. Kilda and dying alone of exposure.

The earliest known photograph of the main wreckage of the Sunderland taken in 1952 (Dr. J. Morton Boyd).

The launch from Stornoway came merely to identify the wreckage, not to recover the bodies. This task proved a problem. The demands for shipping for the Normandy landings earlier in the week had stripped the northern sea area of all available craft and, when the RAF requested help from the Navy, it was not until three days later that a ship became available. On June 13, the armed minesweeping trawler *Walwyns Castle* embarked Wing Commander Campbell with an RAF bearer party, together with the Reverend Lachlan Macleod, minister of St. Columba's Old Parish Church in Stornoway and honorary chaplain to the forces there.

They sailed in a gale. The weather was atrocious and it was not easy to land on St. Kilda. They could not bring their rubber dinghy alongside the jetty and a man had to jump into the waves and bring a line ashore on the beach. The RAF party climbed up to the site of the wreck and carefully gathered the bodies into sacks. Some of them were badly mutilated and even incomplete and, after five days lying in the open, were in no fit state to be brought back to Stornoway. It had therefore already been decided to bury them at sea.

The bodies were brought down to the beach and ferried in rubber dinghies to the trawler, which weighed anchor and sailed out towards the island of Boreray, four miles away. Here Reverend Macleod read the burial service on the deck of the wildly bucking little ship, the RAF guard of honour gave full military honours, and the bodies were reverently committed to the sea.

On his return, Wing Commander Campbell wrote the usual letters of condolence to the next of kin, enclosing in each a 'Confidential Notice', warning them that 'relatives are particularly requested, in the national interest, to ensure that any notices published privately do not disclose the date, place, or

A general view of the crash site today looking south-west at Gleann Mohr along estimated course of aircraft. The main wreckage lies just below the central ridge.

The burn which drains the glen is choked with wreckage.

circumstances of the casualty, or the unit'. Nevertheless in several cases, without consultation with the family, items were in fact published, both in the local and the national newspapers, presumably based on information given by the RAF. In three Stockport and district newspapers appeared an identical account of Bryan Bowker's death giving no indication of date, place, or circumstances of his death. But in a national newspaper appeared the following:

'Air-crew Dead on Lonely Isle.

The crew of a crashed Sunderland flying-boat have been found dead on the lonely isle of St. Kilda, in the Outer Hebrides. The Rev. L. MacLeod, of St. Columba's Church, Stornoway, left yesterday for St. Kilda to conduct a burial service. The island has a population of about 70, and is seven miles in circumference, fringed by precipitous cliffs.'

The relatives were unhappy that these announcements had been made without their knowledge; that the item in the national newspaper did in fact reveal the date (by implication), place and (in part) the circumstances of the accident, quite apart from the gratuitous misinformation that St. Kilda, then entirely uninhabited, had seventy inhabitants!

The letters exchanged between the families of the dead airmen reveal another source of grievance. The personal effects of the casualties were forwarded to their next of kin but some items, especially wallets, money and valuables, were missing and the bereaved relatives found this an additional and quite unnecessary aggravation of their grief. On the other hand, I am not sure that the implication is correct, namely that it was the custom to purloin such articles. The aircrew were very likely to carry their pocket books and money with them — indeed, I have in my possession a penny which was picked up on the site of the crash — and it is probable that these would be destroyed or lost in the crash.

This is not the end of the story. Orders were then given to destroy and bury the wreckage. This seems a very curious and useless thing to do. What harm could a wrecked plane on an uninhabited island do? The answer, in the view of the RAF authorities, was that it could do considerable harm. It was the habit of pilots, flying in remote areas who sighted wreckage, to come down low to investigate whether it was a recent wreck and, if so, whether there were survivors. In view of the severe downdraughts which were and are a feature of St. Kilda, and the poor visibility often encountered there, it was decided that the Sunderland wreckage was a definite hazard to such aircraft. Orders were therefore given to reduce the risk forthwith. On July 9, 1944, a bare month after the crash, an RAF crash crew from No. 56 Maintenance Unit, based on Inverness, under Flight Lieutenant G. Caswell, was embarked on another trawler from Stornoway, HMS *Phrontis,* with a Belgian captain and crew, with orders to dismantle the aircraft. They were accompanied by two naval explosive experts.

After landing that evening and taking up their quarters in the manse, they failed to find the wreck for two days because of the weather. When they did the naval experts set about laying their charges to blow the wreckage into little pieces but in this they were totally unsuccessful. All that happened was that they blew a number of holes in the fuselage. So the naval demolition team departed and left the RAF to take the aircraft to pieces as best they could.

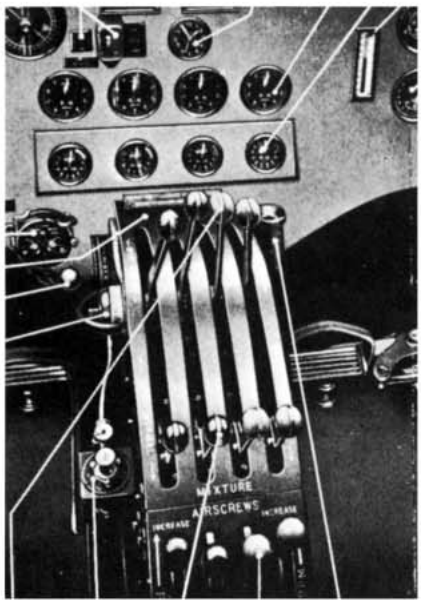
They eventually remained on the island for almost a month. They are reported to have worked from 7.00 a.m. until 8.30 p.m. each day. The work was gruelling. They had to chop the plane — all twenty tons of it — into pieces with axes and wreckage still to be seen on the island bears the marks of the axe blows. Also they had to bury it and the report tells us that they dug thirty-seven holes, eight feet long by four feet wide and four feet deep. Into these they manhandled the engines, sections of the keel weighted with stones and other major components. Traces of these holes can still be seen and all four engines are easily visible. When they had done all this the remaining pieces were painted reddish brown to camouflage them from the air and traces are still visible of this paint.

In spite of all this care, the hillside at the head of Gleann Mhor where the aircraft crashed and the whole of the glen are littered with wreckage. Not all of it lies where it fell. Unknown hands have turned the pieces over and over again and the furious gales which sweep down the glen have blown the lighter pieces long distances. The burn which drains the glen is choked with large and small chunks and there is an extraordinary amount wedged under the rocks to the west of the lochan — almost a mile away. Much of it has finished up in the sea in Glen Bay.

There was of course a Court of Inquiry after the accident. Its findings and suggestions are summarised very briefly on the aircraft's crash card. It is suggested that the cause of the accident was that: 'the pilot apparently did not check the height of St. Kilda or otherwise he was unaware that he was in the vicinity of St. Kilda.'

It is of course presumptious for a layman to

This piece of keel still lies half-buried where No. 56 Maintenance Unit left it in 1944.



Left: **Throttle quadrant as fitted to the Sunderland. The top four levers control the engine revolutions; the middle set the mixture and the lower four the propeller speed control.** *Right:* **The battered quadrant from ML858.**

criticise the verdict of a Court of Inquiry. At the time, the court had all the available evidence at their disposal. They were experts and it must be assumed that they did their job as well as time and conditions allowed. However, as some of the relatives have pointed out, the verdict seems to blame the pilot, at least by implication, on two counts. At least, therefore, it is surely legitimate to ask questions about other possibilities.

The first is that apparently the pilot did not check the height of St. Kilda. One important statement has to be made at the outset: there were two pilots, Warrant Officer Osborne and Flying Officer Ferguson and a navigator, Flying Officer Thompson, and the blame, if blame there is, must therefore fall on all of them. Let us look at the implications. Here was a crew in the final flight of a long training. They had already been together at No. 302 FTU since May 22. They had flown over the whole area on various training missions. The area was a mixture of mountains, sea and islands. The very first thing pilots and navigators had to do was to check on the topographical features, particularly the high ground, wherever they had to fly. St. Kilda stood out like a sore thumb in an expanse of hundreds of square miles of sea, all 1,400 feet of it, and was one of the places named on their flight plan. Would it not have amounted to grave negligence to have failed to check on the height of St. Kilda? I find that hard to believe. It becomes even harder if it is borne in mind that the captain of the aircraft, Warrant Officer Osborne ('the pilot') was not merely a very experienced pilot, but also had already gone through exactly the same course at 302 FTU in Catalinas the previous year. He would certainly know the area very well indeed, and he and his navigator would certainly take care to know where the land masses were and how high the islands were.

What about the second alternative? It was that 'the pilot' was unaware that he was in the vicinity of St. Kilda. On the face of it, this looks like a more reasonable explanation of the accident. We know that the weather had closed in, so that the land was invisible until it was very near but against this stand two undeniable facts. The first is that their objective was St. Kilda and, by dead reckoning, it was evident that after a couple of hours' flying they ought to be in its vicinity. Even though they could not see it, they were aiming at it, and they would know it couldn't be far away. The second fact is that a Sunderland training for convoy escort work would undoubtedly be equipped with radar. I quote from Captain Starling: 'It should have been able to pick up St. Kilda or any land mass at least thirty miles ahead, Therefore the ASV (radar) was either not working; they thought they were well clear of land and were not keeping radar watch, or they made a similar mistake to the one I made in a Wellington, namely, that they were using their side aerials to search on each side of the aircraft, and were not then using their aerials to search ahead.'

Finally, they were certainly flying almost due south, at a height of no more than 800 feet, the altitude at which they crashed. It is possible that they were flying lower than that, and tried to climb out of trouble when they sighted the ground of Gleann Mhor, and failed to clear the ridge at its lowest point by less than 100 feet. Is it possible that they did know the height of St. Kilda (and this seems sure), that they did know where they were (exactly on course), but that they did not realise they were flying much too low? And if so, would this perhaps point to inaccurate altimeter readings?

We end with questions. There is one last question. Why adopt a verdict which by implication seems to cast blame on dead aircrew when there may be others which seem equally or even more probable which do not?

The Beaufighter on Conachair

Dark and handsome, and looking older than his twenty years, 1139258 Sergeant William Duxbury, RAF (VR), had his photograph taken early in 1943 in his sergeant's uniform with his pilot's wings. Son of Joseph and Doris Duxbury, of Blackpool, he had enlisted when he was barely eighteen years old on January 28, 1940 and had trained in the United Kingdom and in Canada before being posted to No. 2 (C) Operational Training Unit stationed at Catfoss on April 7, 1943.

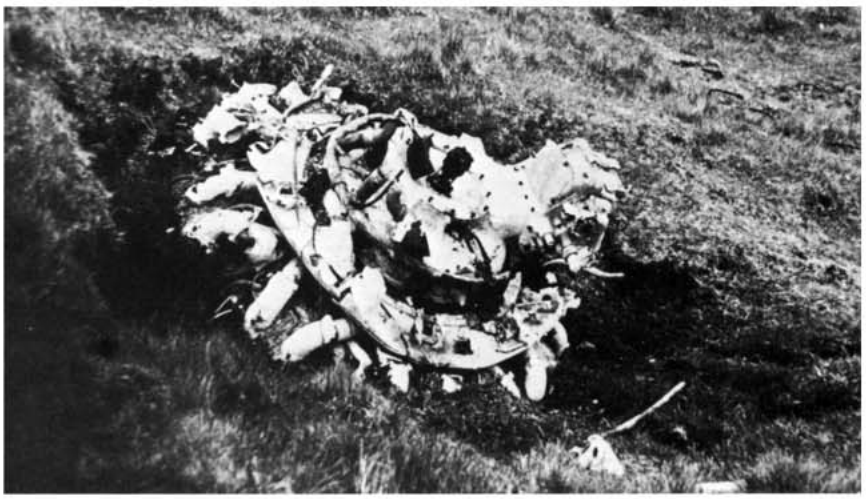
Here he was joined by 1127535 Sergeant Stanley Alban Thornton, two years older, a curly-haired Geordie from South Shields, son of Samuel and Jennie Thornton. He had enlisted late in 1940 and had also trained at various units in Canada and the United Kingdom as an air navigator and wireless operator.

They spent about six weeks at the OTU, working together as the crew of a Beaufighter. They passed out towards the end of May, by which time the records show that Bill Duxbury must have had about seventy hours' solo flying experience with this type of aircraft. (At the time of his death this had risen to 82 hours.)

They then went on leave for a few days. During this time a friend of the family mentions that Bill, who was engaged to be married, seemed to have had a presentiment that he would not come back from his next assignment.

In late May, Bill and Stan took up their posting to No. 304 Ferry Training Unit based at Port Ellen on the island of Islay, one of the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. Together with other crews on the course they collected a new Beaufighter, serial LX798, from the factory at Bristol and flew it up there. The function of this FTU was to prepare crews, already fully trained, to navigate and fly their Beaufighters on the long journey to India and the Middle East. The commanding officer at that time was Squadron Leader Eric Starling, who writes that the crews 'came to me for a fortnight. During this time they were kitted up and the crews were sent on long training flights, by day and night, over the Atlantic. It was also a good chance of finding the exact fuel consumption of the individual (new) aircraft.'

(Incidentally, Squadron Leader Starling adds that due to the Beaufighters' tendency to 'oversteer', at least one in every batch groundlooped on take-off or landing, often into a



One of the Pegasus XVIII engines from the Sunderland.

Sergeant Pilot Bill Duxbury.

nearby quarry, and was a complete write-off, though no crews were lost in this way. He considers that a tricycle undercarriage would have saved hundreds of aircraft for operational purposes.)

One of these night flights, a long-distance navigational and fuel consumption exercise, was scheduled for the late evening of June 3, 1943. It seems clear that the pilots needed as much night flying as possible. The records show that Bill Duxbury had had only five hours' solo experience in Beaufighters at night. Half a dozen aircraft, together with LX798, carried out exercises that night and, as it turned out, several got lost.

Take-off for LX798 was at 2011 hours. No record exists of their exact flight plan. The crews were usually given two or more axes or turning points, such as Rockall, St. Kilda or some of the Outer Hebrides and their orders were to fly over these points and return to base. This was timed at dusk, which in those latitudes would not be until 2200 or even 2300 hours in summer. The fact that the hours of complete darkness were extremely brief did not mean that night flying was easy. On a clear night it would be possible to see islands and land masses silhouetted against the sea but, even in June, the North Atlantic can be very stormy, there can be powerful down-draughts around sea cliffs — St. Kilda is notorious for this — and sea and land can be completely shrouded in cloud, rain and swirling mist. In these conditions, which are common in summer, it is impossible to locate land masses visually from a safe height, and extremely dangerous to descend below the cloud to obtain a visual fix.

The normal procedure for crews that got lost, if visual contact with the ground was out of the question, was to call up the local radio direction finding stations of which there were several in the area. Fixes were obtained by triangulation, that is, the bearing of three widely spaced RDF stations were plotted on a map, and where the lines met was the position of the aircraft. That was the theory. In practice the three lines often did not meet, especially if the stations were far away and formed what was known in the trade as a 'cocked hat' which gave a rough position. As Squadron Leader Starling writes, this was sufficient for an experienced pilot (he had 4,700 hours in 1943), but 'it was somewhat different for inexperienced pilots navigating badly and correcting their bad navigation with equally bad radio fixes. They relied largely on luck to keep them alive while they gained experience.' In an emergency, radar could be called in. The radar stations were at that time purely concentrated on defence against hostile aircraft. When an aircraft was missing, the local station could call Group (Group 17, based on Oban), which could ask the radar people if they had any stray blips on their screen. A lost aircraft flying a triangular course, or even circling, 'could easily be spotted on the screen, and once the aircraft settled on a course, all aerodromes (if any) ahead were lit up and searchlights waved their beams in the direction of the nearest field. It sometimes worked.'

On the navigational exercise scheduled on June 3, 1943, no fewer than three aircraft lost their bearings and one of them was LX798. Previous to this, all had made the usual reports — the standing orders were usually to radio back to base every hour — but at about midnight LX798 was heard requesting a fix. The request was repeated at intervals for the next half hour. We now know that no message was received by any of the ground stations, which therefore did not reply. It was in fact picked up by two aircraft from the same unit who themselves were well off course, sixty miles out to sea off Donegal Bay in the west of Ireland. The receiving aircraft had problems of their own and, since the transmission gave no sign that LX798 was in distress, they did not relay it to the ground RDF stations.

Sergeant Stanley Thornton, navigator.

Indeed, the crews had no means of knowing that they alone had received the signal; no means of knowing that it was urgent and no indication of any need to relay it. At about 0030 on June 4, LX798 went off the air and sent no more messages. The subsequent enquiry concluded that the reason why its signals had not been received was that its transmissions must have been 'screened by Irish mountains', as the crash card states. The other two aircraft eventually landed safely. LX798 did not.

The usual highly organised air search took off at dawn. The only indications of the possible site of the plane's disappearance were that the two other aircraft which had heard LX798 requesting a fix had themselves been well off course to the west of Ireland, so the search was concentrated on an area roughly 230 miles to the westward of Donegal Bay, out in the open Atlantic. Meanwhile the usual telegram was sent to the next of kin, saying that both men were missing. Stan Thornton's brother Robert was at that time a Flight Lieutenant in the technical branch of the RAF, and he still has a letter written by an officer of 304 FTU, Flying Officer James, who was the only qualified flying instructor on the station. Flying Officer James writes at some

The cone of Conachair (1,397ft) looking from the east. The Beaufighter wreckage lies scattered in the gullies bordering the sheer cliffs.

length to explain the circumstances of the accident, mentioning that only one aircraft had picked up the signals from LX798 (whereas the CO says two did) and concluding that 'your brother was considerably south of his track on the last leg of a navigational exercise' and that he was 'returning to base . . . off the north-west coast of the Free State.' He enclosed a rough sketch map of the area, out of scale and inaccurate but making the point abundantly clear.

Needless to say the search was fruitless but it continued throughout the following days, and we can follow its progress from a series of letters written by the CO to the relatives. He wrote at least four letters in an effort to keep them abreast of developments. In his letter of June 6 he tells them that 'Everything possible is being done, the Navy, the air-sea rescue organisation and aircraft of three other stations are searching all possible areas where he might be.' In this letter he held out some hope that the crew might yet be found, probably in their dinghies.

A month later, on July 9, he wrote again to say that the search was still continuing, but without success. He explains the circumstances of the flight as outlined above, and adds that if the crew had in fact ditched in the sea and got into their dinghies, they would almost certainly have been spotted by the 'hundreds of aircraft' flying round the Scottish coast or the 'hundreds of fishing boats' off the Irish coast. He concludes with the prophetic sentence: 'This is what leads me to think that they hit a high cliff and bounced back into the sea.'

The search was never entirely abandoned, and eventually, late in August 1943, a Beaufighter from No. 304 FTU reported seeing the tail of a wrecked Beaufighter on St. Kilda. Nothing speaks more eloquently of the difficult conditions of visibility round the islands than the fact that many aircraft must have overflown the wreck for nearly three months and none of them saw the considerable wreckage on the highest hill in the whole group of islands.

Immediately this sighting was reported, the RAF sent a request to the naval authorities who at once dispatched the trawler H.M.S. *Phrontis,* commanded by Sub-Lieutenant Bourke — the regular skipper was ill — with a Belgian crew to Hirta. There a naval party was landed on August 27, and his report describes the crash site on the summit of Conachair: 'On reaching the scene of the wreckage, it was discovered that the aircraft had exploded and wreckage had scattered over an area of 100 yards in diameter. The tail unit was almost complete and resembled that of a Beaufighter, but I could not positively identify it as such. This unit bore the number LX798. A number of small plates were taken from various parts of the machine and accompany this report.

Nelson Morton examines some of the Beaufighter wreckage several hundred feet below the summit of Conachair.

'From examination of the scene and the wreckage the following conclusions are drawn. The aircraft was on a course of approximately 345 degrees when it struck the island at a point where the gradient is about 1 in 7 and the forepart of the aircraft was embedded in the soft peat at a slightly depressed angle, indicating that the pilot was probably in thick cloud and was losing height in seeking his position. This conclusion is supported by the fact that had visibility been good and an emergency landing attempted, there is a place a quarter of a mile distant and 400 feet lower down, where a belly landing would probably have been successful.

'From the distribution of the wreckage I concluded that when the aircraft struck, the fuselage became separated from the engine and wings and continued onward across the top of the hill, shedding parts as it went, until finally what remained of the fuselage and the occupants plunged over the cliff with a drop of about 900 feet into the sea. This spot is about 150 yards from the place where the machine first struck.

'It was impossible to decide when the explosion took place as, though indications are that the fuselage continued onwards over the cliff, there is perspex littered all over the area. However there was a violent explosion at some time as the cylinders of the two radial engines were also scattered over a wide area, and all petrol tanks were burnt up, except one which was partially consumed.

'In the crater where the machine struck are the two propellors and in the direction where the fuselage went, parts were found in this order: first the tail wheel, then two Oerlikon cannon embedded in the peat, then the compass, then parts of accumulators and dry batteries and the door and finally, on the edge of the cliff, the pack of a parachute torn from the harness and with the silk burnt away and the shroud lines partly burnt. On the spot were found a shoe and a flying boot, the only traces of the occupants to be found.'

Although the naval officer could not positively identify the aircraft, the evidence he brought back with him left no room for doubt and, on September 3, 1943, Squadron Leader Starling wrote a fourth letter to the next of kin, stating that 'the aircraft was definitely

The armoured windscreen was discovered slotted into the turf just four feet from the edge of the sheer cliffs!

identified but no bodies were found . . . so they must have bounced back into the water.' This conclusion is not strictly accurate. Squadron Leader Starling had already mentioned the possibility of the aircraft flying into a cliff and bouncing back into the sea. This coloured his thinking in this instance. All the evidence is that the bodies, together with the shattered wreckage of the aircraft, continued forward and were catapulted over the cliff, most probably into the sea.

With his customary thoughtfulness Squadron Leader Starling invited Stanley Thornton's brother, Robert, to come up to Islay and visit the wreckage on Hirta. This he did. Much later he wrote: 'I flew over St. Kilda but visibility as I recall wasn't too good that day and I saw little.' This flight is very probably that recorded in the log of No. 304 FTU on September 16 when Beaufighter LZ242 was sent to view the wreckage.

A clear enough picture of the wreckage scattered over the summit of Conachair was given in the naval officer's report, the assumption being that everything else fell, with the crew's bodies, into the sea. Understandably, no attempt was made to go beyond the wreck site. In 1947 the renowned ornithologist James Fisher visited St. Kilda and wrote an article, mainly about its bird life. Robert Thornton saw this, he thinks in the *Radio Times,* and wrote to Mr. Fisher asking about the aircraft wreckage on the island. The reply was detailed, accompanied by a map, but quite misleading, since Mr. Fisher assumed that the Sunderland had crashed on Conachair and the Beaufighter in Gleann Mhor. Mr. Thornton realised he was mistaken but did not enlighten him.

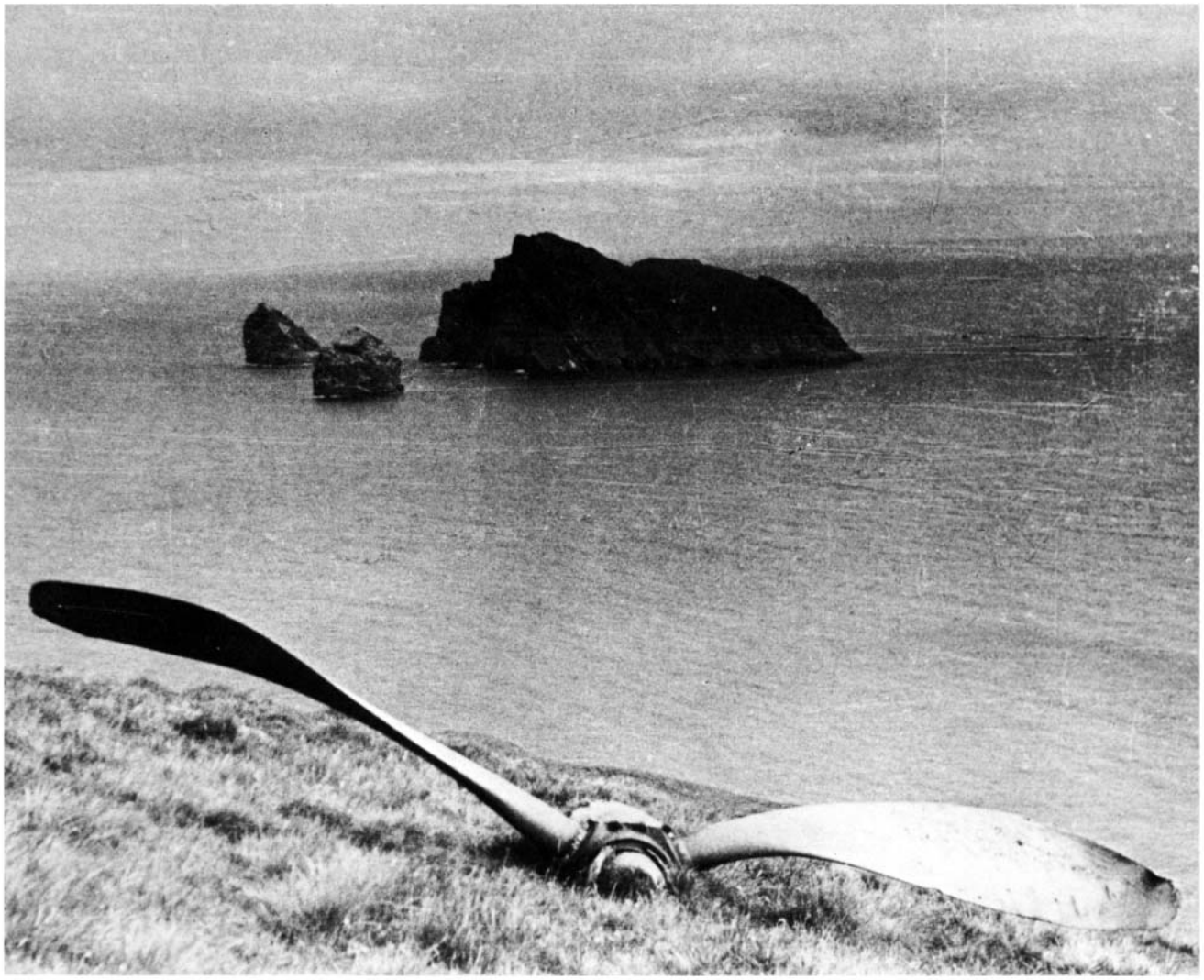
About 1952, Dr. J. Morton Boyd, now Director of the Nature Conservancy Council, also visited the wreckage while on St. Kilda and clearly remembers identifying it as a Beaufighter; the propellor as probably belonging to a Bristol Hercules engine (in this he was correct) and a cluster of four Hispano 20mm cannons with magazines into which the shells had rusted. These were not mentioned in the naval officer's report.

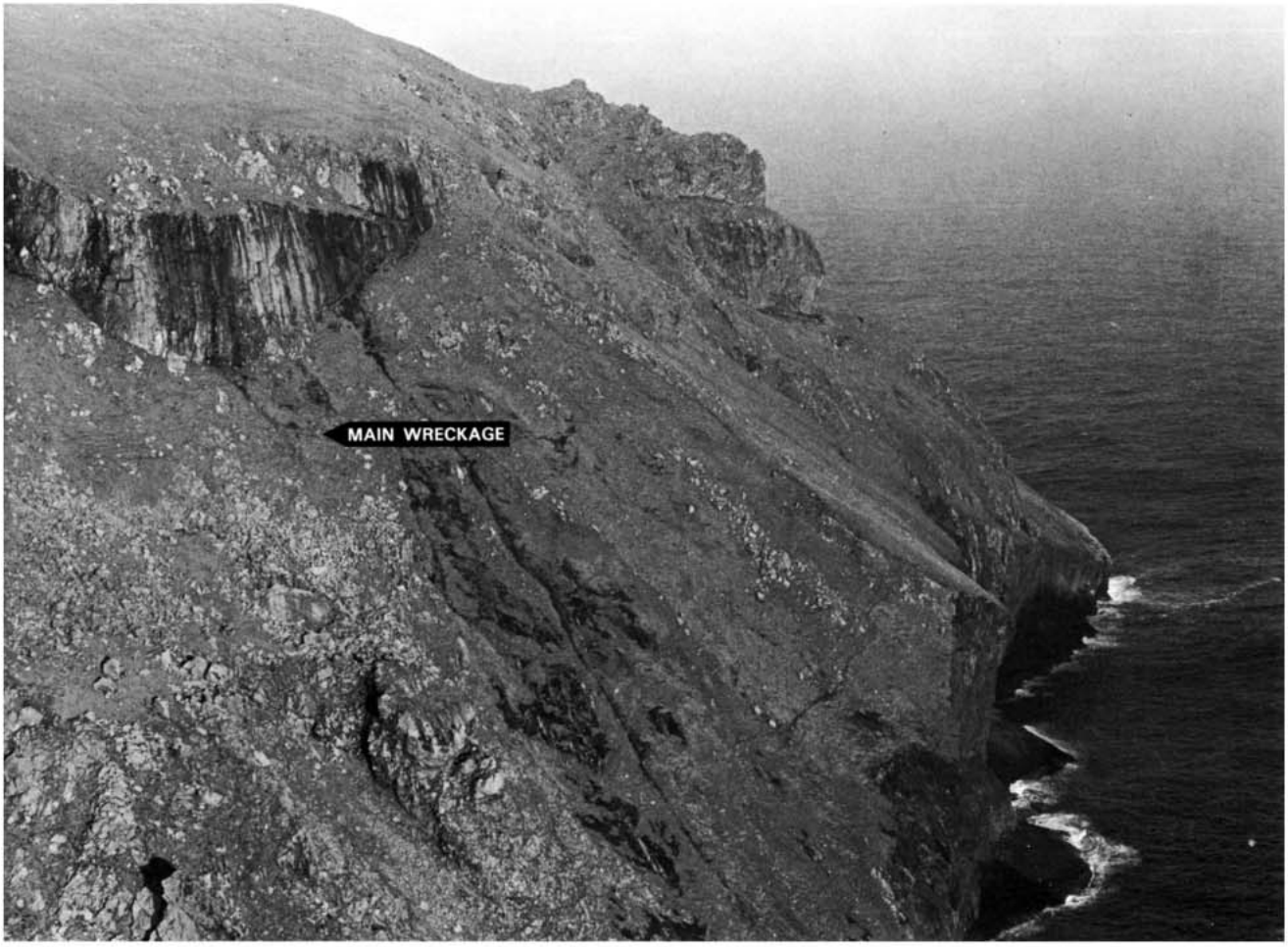
In 1957 came Operation Hardrock, the establishment of an RAF base on St. Kilda, now operated by the Royal Artillery, the function of which is to monitor the target area of the rockets fired from the range on South Uist with a view to ensuring that ships do not sail unwittingly into the danger zone. One of the members of the RAF Airfield Construction Unit was Eric Smith, from Bamber Bridge near Preston, who wrote a brief account of his visit to the wreckage on Conachair which was published with a photograph in the *Lancs Evening Post* on June 15, 1979. Once again the Conachair wreckage is stated to belong to the Sunderland.

The fairly abundant wreckage described by these witnesses is no longer there. All that is left is the solitary airscrew with one blade missing and small pieces of associated wreckage. It is unlikely that it was removed by the RAF personnel as souvenirs since they were strictly briefed to leave everything as it was. As Mr. Smith says, 'it was the only memorial then to the men who had been killed.' It seems probable that the cannons and other heavy items were removed after 1957 and no doubt the lighter pieces were blown into the sea by the howling gales that sweep over St. Kilda.

Recent research has added a little to the story. It was assumed that the bulk of the aircraft fell into the sea down the sheer cliffs on the east side of Conachair and that all that remained was the residual wreckage on the summit. This is not quite correct. North of the sea cliffs there are very steep grassy gullies, separated by clearly defined ridges, falling down almost to sea level. Climbing down these gullies is not everybody's cup of tea, but it can be done. About 250 feet from the summit a trail of shattered wreckage can be traced right down to the low sea cliffs facing Bradastac. We have located, in order, the starter motor; one of the oleo legs; components of the cooling system; some of the fuselage struts; the complete armoured windscreen slotted into the turf within four feet of the cliffs; what looks like the complete main body strut jutting like a finger into the air and visible even from the sea; much of the cockpit wiring and some of the switchgear and a scattering of smaller parts culminating in a broken propellor blade, several cylinders from an engine and a complete engine block — these last in a rockfall more than 800 feet below the crash site. There is one other piece of wreckage, a very small section of aluminium sheeting, which has evidently fallen down the sheer cliff and by some freak of gravity has come to rest on a tiny ledge on the cliff face about 250 feet below the crash site. It is still clearly visible in spite of its now being the foundation of a fulmar's nest.

No trace of the crew has been found among this wreckage, much of which is well embedded into the turf and moss and it is probable, as Squadron Leader Starling suggested, that their bodies fell into the sea.





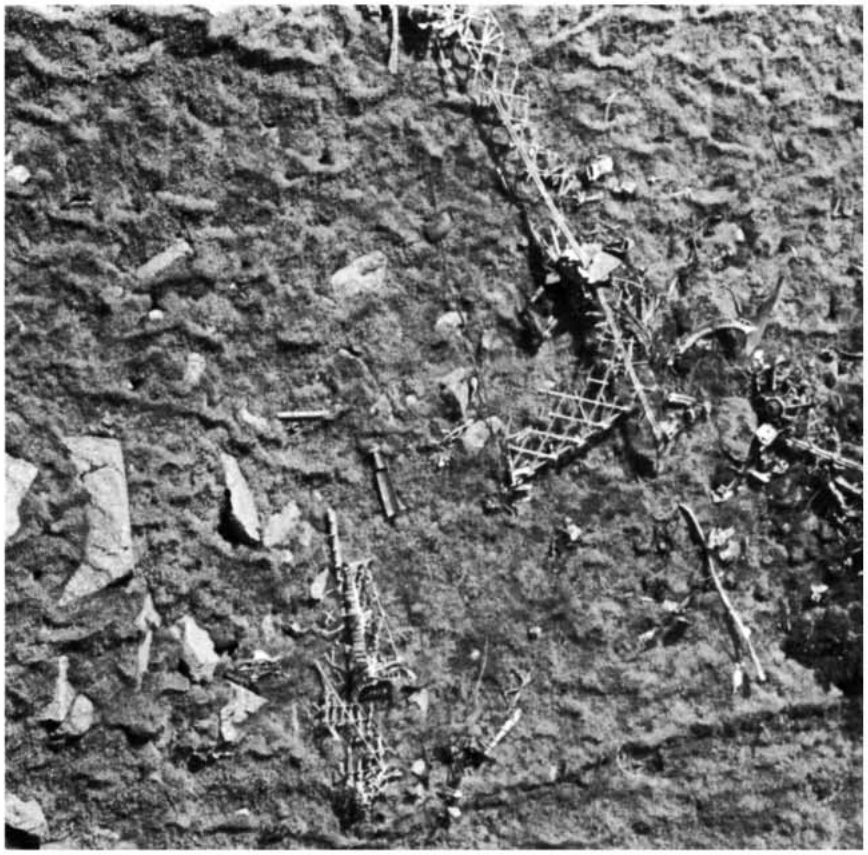
Wellington on Soay

Above: **Aerial view from the south-west of the crash site below the altar cliff.** *Below:* **Close up showing the geodetic construction of the wreckage. (All the photographs on Soay were taken by the Royal Air Force team from Kinloss and are Crown Copyright.)**

Soay is the extreme north-westerly island of the St. Kilda group, over 1,200 feet in height, and very inaccessible. A crashed aircraft lies about 600 feet up, below a sheer cliff, on a grass slope surrounded by scree. It is easily visible at a distance of about half-a-mile from the Cambir, the northernmost promontory of Hirta. We did not realise how fortunate we had been in identifying the other two wrecked aircraft on Hirta until we tried to trace the identity of the Soay wreck.

There are really only three ways of finding out which aircraft was involved in any particular crash, where it came from, and who were its crew. The first is to visit the wreckage itself. It is usually possible for an expert to find sufficient evidence, in the shape of serial numbers and identification letters, to identify the aircraft. The second way is to read through the records in the hope that sooner or later you will chance upon the reports concerning that particular aircraft, stating that it crashed at that particular place on a particular date. Once the aircraft, or even a single member of the crew, is positively identified, it is simply a matter of going through the records of the RAF station and group to which it belonged, and the casualty records, for particulars of the crew. The third way is to locate people with personal knowledge of that particular aircraft — those attached to the unit to which it belonged, those who were concerned in searching for it when it was overdue, those whose duty it was to recover bodies and/or equipment, and relatives of the crew. This is even more of a hit or miss process than the others and, in the event, it did not help us very much.

Taking the wreckage first, it must again be emphasised that Soay is a very inaccessible



island indeed. For the St. Kildans, who knew the weather and sea conditions well and were superb climbers, a landing from the sea was a relatively easy operation, generally at Mol Shoay, the boulder beach in the Sound of Soay. For anybody else it is not easy at the best of times, and often it is quite impossible. It is not easy to get a boat into the Sound, there is almost always a swell at Mol Shoay, and the climb up to the wreck is difficult and in places dangerous because of falling rocks. Consequently relatively few people have landed on Soay since the islands were evacuated in 1930, and the majority of those who have were primarily interested in other matters and paid scant attention to the aircraft.

It is of course possible, indeed easy, to reach the wreck site if you land by helicopter on the comparatively flat grassland on the top of the island. This has been done on several occasions. It goes without saying that it is not easy to obtain a helicopter. Moreover, the island is a nature reserve, and a landing must be approved by the Nature Conservancy Council, the National Trust for Scotland and the military authorities. Permission will not be given except for valid reasons and has been refused on occasion.

When we first began to take an interest in the St. Kilda air crashes, the word was that the wreck on Soay was German. This was not impossible: some German aircraft had the range and several German planes are known to have crashed on Scottish islands during World War II. However, even the sort of superficial examination which is possible through binoculars from the Cambir makes it clear that the construction of the wings and fuselage is geodetic, of the type invented by Sir Barnes Wallis and adopted by Vickers in three of their aircraft — the Wellesley, the Wellington and the Warwick — and not used in any other type. Moreover, subsequent reports of components which were noted or recovered made it clear fairly early on that the plane was certainly British.

As a result of our researches, interest was aroused in the Soay wreckage and, in 1978,

three expeditions landed there, one by sea and two by helicopter, with the purpose of examining and, if possible, identifying the aircraft. The first took place on July 12, 1978 from the yacht *Aiva II*, skippered by Richard Fresson, who had served in the RAF as had two of his crew members. By great good fortune they encountered ideal weather and a party spent about an hour at the crash site. They later compiled a very detailed report of their findings, including sketch plans of the site and its relation to the islands. It stated:

'The crash area was below the ''altar cliff'' surrounded on either side and below by scree, but the ground itself at the scene of the crash was relatively soft and had allowed the main part of the fuselage forward of the wings to be totally embedded. The major parts of the wreckage missing are one of the engines and the fuselage section aft of the main spar and forward of the tail assembly'. This would seem to disprove the conclusion reached by others, whose visit to the wreckage was more superficial, that the aircraft had hit the altar cliff and bounced back on to the grass slope. Mr. Fresson also noted that there was no sign of a rear turret. He observed that:

1. The wings and two rear sections of the fuselage are of a geodetic construction and were fabric covered except for the flaps.
2. The aircraft wings are half complete with respect to the wing span and include the main spar assembly which lies along a line running $070^{o}/250^{o}$ (T). Part of the engine bearers and undercarriage gear are in position and lying close by are the two engine CTC fire extinguisher bottles.
3. The height of the main wreckage is on the 600 ft. OS contour. The intact nature of the wings suggests that the impact was frontal and occurred while the aircraft was on a heading of approximately 340^{o} (T) at a height of 600 ft.
4. Fabric found on the leading edge of the tail fin was black and there was no evidence of burning and the red under-

dope was evident when some of the fabric was removed. It therefore suggests that the fin of the aircraft at least was painted black.

5. A live magnesium flare and .303 bullets were found some 60 ft. above the main crash area, indicating that the aircraft was armed.
6. A size 8 'square-bashing boot' with the skeleton of a human foot was found at the scene of the main impact.
7. A battery cover states categorically that it is an RAF type and gives recommended generating rates embossed onto the black bakelite.
8. The rudder or perhaps aileron was found which had been fabric covered except for the leading edge and also had a maker's modification plate together with a fixed trim tab half-way up the trailing edge. The Serial Nos. found on the plate read:

Type	RACVA ' ' W
Serial Nos.	238
Mod. Nos.	—

Unfortunately no attempt was made to discover the make and number of the engine, which might have established the make and identity of the plane, but one member of the party concluded that the engine was probably a Pegasus.

Richard Fresson's party also discovered human bones in the wreckage. Correctly he reported this to the police and the Procurator Fiscal in Stornoway whose jurisdiction extends to St. Kilda. The Procurator Fiscal decided that it was necessary to visit the wreckage again and attempt to identify the aircraft and so determine the names of the crew who died on Soay and found their resting place there. He therefore approached the RAF and arrangements were made to fly him there with an RAF party by helicopter. Two sorties were flown in the late summer and autumn of 1978 and another in 1979.

After long negotiations with AR9, (the RAF Casualty Branch) the AOC Scotland and RAF Kinloss, permission was kindly granted by AR9 for us to visit the Mountain Rescue Team attached to RAF Kinloss, to examine the photographs and reports concerning their visits to St. Kilda and to discuss what conclusions, if any, could be made on the evidence available.

The visit to RAF Kinloss with Keith Briers, an aviation archaeologist, on June 11, 1980, lasted the best part of a day. The RAF personnel concerned were Flight Lieutenant Eric Hughes, OC of the Mountain Rescue Team (MRT), and Flight Sergeant Ray Sefton, BEM, both of whom had taken a leading part in the visits to Soay.

The RAF made three visits to the crash site. The first was on October 12, 1978, and lasted for about four hours. On this and subsequent visits the team landed from a Sea King helicopter. It was discovered that the landing site on the relatively flat grassland on the summit of Soay was not hard, as expected, but boggy and very soft so that the helicopter's wheels sank almost completely even though the rotors continued to revolve. The team were therefore bundled unceremoniously out of the helicopter which then flew off. At the crash site the team, led by Flight Lieutenant Hughes and Flight Sergeant Sefton, excavated part of the site, choosing the vicinity of a seat pan as the probable locus of the cockpit. The digging, which went down two or three feet in places, was successful in that human remains were dug up, obviously parts of several bodies, strewn over a fairly wide area. These remains were taken away by the Procurator Fiscal.

A second visit was requested and carried out a fortnight later as it was felt that the team had got so near a positive identification that another dig would settle the issue once and for all. Although the team spent seven hours at the crash site and extended the area of excavation considerably, very little additional material was recovered.

A third visit was therefore decided on, with a view to spending two days on the site and digging extensively, in the hope that definitive evidence would be uncovered, particularly in the form of identification tags or aircraft numbers. This did not take place until September 15-16, 1979. On this occasion the Procurator Fiscal's representative was Detective Sergeant Findlater of Stornoway CID. Efforts were made to land from the helicopter nearer the crash site but it was found quite impracticable for the team to be winched down and smoke floats showed considerable turbulence. So the high plateau was used again with the usual difficulties. The weather was very bad. The four tents, pitched in what appeared to be a sheltered gully, were all severely ripped and the night was extremely uncomfortable. To make matters worse, very little further evidence of identification was uncovered, the total absence of identification tags being remarkable. The team was extremely disappointed and frustrated by their inability to bring the project to a successful conclusion, especially as the site itself was wet and extremely muddy, a deep deposit of bird droppings making digging unpleasant.

The Procurator Fiscal decided that the human bones recovered should be returned to the site and buried there. This was done. The burial location was not marked but it is close to the wreckage. Estimates of the weight of bones varied between 30lb and 60lb, apparently belonging to several bodies.

Although the team badly wanted to obtain positive identification of the aircraft and of the crew members who died in the crash, and were frustrated by their failure to do so, the decision has been made that no further RAF expeditions to the site should be planned. The reasons are multiple. The danger of landing a heavy helicopter on the soggy and terraced surface of the summit plateau comes high on the list. The fact that each successive visit produced less, not more evidence than its predecessor; the difficulties and dangers in spending the night in camp; the vagaries of the weather and the reasonable objections of those in charge of the nature reserve all played a part in this decision.

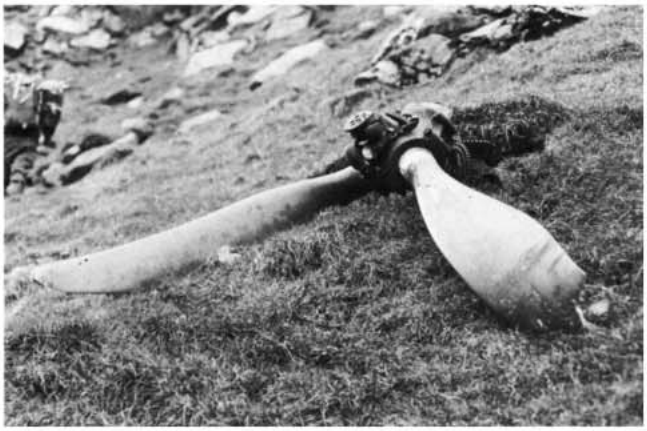
As already explained, the wreckage lies below the altar cliff on the south-east slope of Soay, almost exactly opposite the Cambir on Hirta. Its height is almost precisely 600 feet. It lies mainly on boggy ground on a slope of about 40 degrees. The wreckage is very badly corroded and much of it is now buried. There is evidence that the earth is gradually slipping downhill and that this movement has covered some of the wreckage and perhaps moved pieces downhill in its path. There is evidence of an explosion, probably on or immediately after impact, and clear evidence of fire. The main wreckage is remarkably intact and the dispersed pieces are confined to a relatively small area. A careful search around this area showed that there was almost nothing further than about 100 metres from the main site.

At this spot are substantial remains of both wings with engine nacelles. One engine, thought to be the starboard engine, was intact in close proximity. Efforts to turn the engine over in order to find its number — a special engine expert was included in the team — resulted in it disintegrating and, in spite of every precaution, rolling down the steep slope into the boulder field below. The engine expert definitely identified it as a Pegasus XVIII. One airscrew with two intact blades was found about 100 metres to the westward of the main wreckage and two broken blades were found under the starboard engine, presumably belonging to it, and another under the altar cliff. The expert identified the airscrew as a variable-pitch propellor as fitted in the 1940s to the Mk VIII Wellington. There was no sign of a Leigh light, which indicated that this was a day version of the Mk VIII. There were no signs of the Frazer-Nash turrets, either forward or rear, apart from two toothed steel traversing rings on which the turret would swivel. Three machine guns were found, badly rusted, one of which had a bullet in the breech, another was plainly a beam gun, with the remains of the ring and bead sights. The third has been lost. Live .303 ammunition and an ammunition supply box were also found.

What was previously reported by other visitors to the site as a bomb — one witness described it as a 250lb bomb — proved to be the faring of the D/F loop mounted on the roof of the aircraft. This was recovered by the team. That the aircraft was not armed with depth charges or bombs seems certain from the fact that the electro-mechanical release units were in the cocked position. The expert armourer's assessment was that no bombs were carried and no attempt was made to jettison any armament stores. The guns were loaded and cocked.

The team, headed by an expert navigator, concluded positively that the wreck now lies on a heading of approximately 235 degrees. (This conclusion is at variance with that made above by Richard Fresson.)

Many other items of wreckage were identified: the undercarriage and tail wheel



Fully-feathering airscrew with reduction gear.

A radiator amongst a tangle of pipes and wires.

Turbo-supercharger from one of the Pegasus XVIII engines.

Tip from the starboard tailplane.

The toothed ring from the base of the Frazer-Nash turret.

The 'bomb' — in fact the D/F loop housing.

The electro-mechanical release unit in the cocked position.

A 1,500 watt 24 volt DC generator.

Above: **The starboard engine as it was found and** *right* **before it had rolled down the hill.**

close to the main crash site, air bottles belonging to the emergency flotation system and the fire extinguishers.

Evidence of fire, perhaps not very prolonged, is given by a stub of an H/F aerial recovered by the team, the base of which is charred, and particularly by pieces of aluminium components which present the bluish-white tinge with some melting. The experts considered the fire was severe.

As already stated, pieces of the aircraft are strewn around the main wreck site and some of these may, in the view of the team, give some indication of what may have happened. If the present posture of the wreckage indicates that the aircraft was on an approximate heading of 235 degrees — a conclusion which seems probable but by no means certain — the total absence of wreckage to the north-east would indicate that there was no preliminary impact followed by a bouncing forward motion. However, under the altar cliff which at this point is about 150 feet high, are two flaps, a broken propellor blade, and what has been identified as the tip of the starboard tailplane, which has been broken off. These are roughly thirty metres from the main wreck. It seems possible that the plane, flying in poor visibility, approached the land mass of Soay and that the pilot suddenly sighted the cliff ahead, took emergency evasive action causing the starboard tailplane to foul the cliff. The aircraft then seems to have stalled and fallen rather than flown into the boggy ground below the cliff. This would explain the apparent collapse of the fuselage and the strong impression that the first full impact was also the last and that the plane was flying at very slow speed. It was clearly substantially still intact on impact.

This is not to say that it is still intact today. Several major components cannot now be found. These may have broken off and rolled down the slope into the sea. There are no dials and no instrument panel with the single exception of a rubber grommet used as a mounting for the stop watch which was drawn from stores for each sortie. A radar hood was also found. It is possible that many such items were buried by the earthslide already mentioned.

Apart from the scattered bones, from which it was impossible to deduce how many casualties there were, certain other personal items were found which may go some way towards identifying the aircraft and its crew. Small pieces of decayed fabric, RAF blue in colour, apparently from uniform clothing, were found and a piece of white material, possibly a scarf. Apart from the 'square-bashing' boot already discovered (but not seen by the team) no fewer than five separate RAF issue shoes were dug up. Unfortunately no personal identification marks were found in these. One of these, perhaps size 7, was brought back. The fact that no flying boots were seen is very curious for flying in a Wellington was a very cold business in almost any weather.

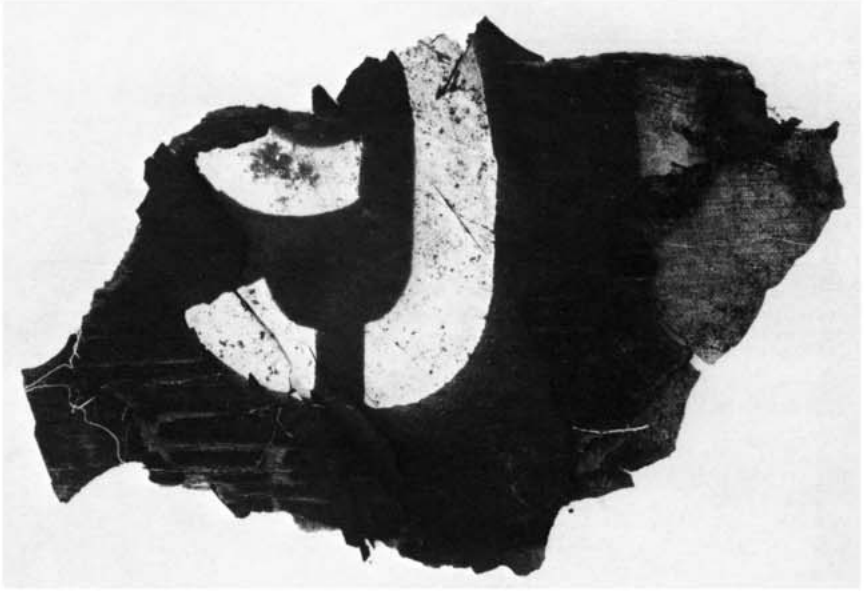
Not a single identification tag was discovered. Each crew member would have carried two tags, one waterproof, the other fireproof. Of the ten or twelve tags which should have been on board, not one was discovered. During the final dig, two small items were recovered. One was a cap badge, clamped in a piece of metal wreckage, with rotted pieces of blue material still adhering to it. From this material it was impossible to conclude whether it came from a forage cap or a peaked cap. The letters are RCAF. The reasonable inference is, therefore, that it belonged to a Canadian. It was found in close proximity to a number of Venus pencils and a Mk II navigational computer. The inference may be that the presumed Canadian was also the navigator.

Finally a small piece of fabric was unearthed, black in colour, with a white number stencilled on it and the vague outline of part of another number alongside it. The clear number seems to be a '9' (or perhaps a '6'). The vague number has been tentatively identified as a '5' or a '0'. The numbers are about three inches in height. This item was found roughly at the centre of the dig. Aircraft identification letters were normally somewhat larger, and this material might have come from a dinghy, although it seems not altogether out of the question to suggest that the identification letters might have been roughly stencilled on the fabric of the fuselage if for some reason the original number had been obliterated.

Although this last evidence is described in Flight Lieutenant Hughes' report as 'flimsy', and is certainly circumstantial, it does seem to advance our researches if taken together. Only 394 Wellington Mk VIII aircraft were made, and most of them were used for training or Coastal Command work. If an average of ten per cent is accepted as the casualty rate, that would mean that about forty Mk VIIIs crashed. Very few of these came down in the North Atlantic area but one of these is serialed LA995. This aircraft was last seen in the vicinity of Boreray on February 23, 1943. Boreray is almost exactly north-east of Soay, and, if LA995 trying to gain height did crash on Soay, it might well be on a heading of NW or WNW. If the Soay wreck is LA995, then it is not surprising that it carried the number '9', followed by a '5' on its side and possibly elsewhere. And above all, the navigator of LA995 was a Canadian.

According to its crash card, it belonged to No. 303 FTU, which was then stationed at Stornoway. The aircraft took off from base at 1450 on February 23, 1943. Together with other aircraft from the same unit, it was on a navigational exercise and fuel consumption test — the usual FTU routine. The entire trip should have lasted about five hours, and the first objective was the island of St. Kilda. A signal was received at 1523 reporting all correct but not long after this the aircraft was sighted by another aircraft from the same unit in the vicinity of Boreray, flying very low, and apparently approaching distinct down-draughts near that island. LA995 then disappeared from view into the mist and rain and made no further signals. It failed to return to base. Extensive enquiries were made, as usual, at other airfields to find whether the plane had landed elsewhere but without success. A very thorough search was then begun — eleven Wellingtons were in the air the next day — but nothing was ever found. The crash card was duly filled in. The site of the crash was filled in as 'N/K' (not known) and no time was given beyond the general indication 'Dusk'. As far as can be ascertained, no report of the sighting of the wreckage was ever made. For this reason, and also because a member of the crew was washed ashore about a fortnight later, the entry in the crash card under 'Place' was altered (in another hand) from 'N/K' to 'at Sea'.

There were six men, all sergeants, in the crew. The first pilot was 1215504 Sergeant Ralph Spencer, son of Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Spencer, of Bradford, Yorkshire. The second pilot was 1332286 Sergeant George Stewart, a married man with two children, who lived in March, Cambridgeshire. The other members of the crew were 1204149 Sergeant George Turley, a married man from Smethwick, Staffordshire; 1378796 William Day, also a married man who lived in Hetton-le-Hole, County Durham; 1267971 Sergeant William Alston, a native of Clapton, London and R/98799 Flight Sergeant Vincent Knutson, a Canadian from Naicam, Saskatchewan.



Two clues which may help to solve the Wellington mystery. *Above:* This Royal Canadian Air Force cap badge was found by the RAF team from Kinloss on their third visit to investigate the crash site. They also found a piece of black doped fabric *(right)* with a white letter '6' or '9' stencilled on it.

On March 2, 1943, Sergeant Alston's body was washed ashore on the north coast of the island of Lewis. It was taken home and buried with military honours in Collective Grave 20 in Manor Park Cemetery, East Ham.

There are far too many ifs and buts for an absolutely certain identification. This could only come from dog tags or aircraft letters and/or numbers. The RAF's Casualty Branch has no alternative but to say this cannot be arrived at. But the circumstantial evidence builds up into a pretty convincing mosaic and the ordinary layman may well be forgiven in accepting one RAF assessment that the identification of LA995 is now '99.99 per cent certain'.

Nagging doubts still persist in spite of this. If the Soay wreck is LA995, it is difficult to explain why Sergeant Alston was found drowned on the coast of Lewis two weeks later. Did he bale out, and if so why? There is also another Wellington VIII which cannot be left out of account. It is HX448, flying from Silloth and Limavady to Rockall, which was lost on September 28, 1942. It had five Canadians on board. It is still a possible. What is the importance of the fact that the Soay crew were wearing shoes? Was it a hot day? We are trying to reach a positive identification. We may not succeed. But we're still working at it.

In 1979 our author, the Reverend John Barry, parish priest of St. Mark's Roman Catholic Church, Oxgangs, Edinburgh, was instrumental in the erection of a memorial on Hirta to the crews of all the three aircraft with the close co-operation of the National Trust for Scotland, the owners of the island. The twelve-strong party for the dedication ceremony included Joan Bowker, daughter of Flight Sergeant Bowker, Mr. Philip White and his wife Peggy from Auckland, brother-in-law and sister of Flying Officer Richard Ferguson and Margaret Roulston and Mrs. Sybil Sutherland from New Plymouth, sister and widow respectively of Sergeant David Roulston — all crew members of the Sunderland.

After leaving Mallaig pier on Tuesday, May 22, 1979 and a choppy sea voyage in a 40-ton fishing boat, the party arrived at St. Kilda at noon on Wednesday. They were met by the resident Army detachment and taken to the Sunderland crash site in Land-Rovers. That evening thirty-five people, including the National Trust working party, Army and civilian personnel working on the island and the relatives, packed the tiny kirk for the dedication service and unveiling of the memorial plaque by David Maclehose on behalf of the Trust.

With a typical 'St. Kilda' background of Stac Lee, Stac an Armin and the cliffs of Boreray shrouded in mist, the relatives of the crewmen of the crashes visit Hirta for the dedication service in May 1979. L-R: Sybil Sutherland (widow of David Roulston), Margaret Roulston (his sister), Philip White (brother-in-law) and Peggy White (sister of Richard Ferguson), all from New Zealand, and Joan Bowker (daughter of Bryan Bowker, now dead). Behind is the Reverend John Barry, guiding light for the erection of the memorial in his role as Chairman of the St. Kilda Club (John Wilkie).

The service of dedication of the memorial plaque (left) was conducted by Father Barry in the kirk of St. Kilda on Ascension Thursday in 1979 (John Wilkie).

DEATH OF AN AERODROME

Ever since we published *Airfields of the Eighth — Then and Now* in 1978, airfields (or aerodromes as they were called in 1940) have been the subject of many letters from our readers. The vast majority of aerodromes used during the Second World War in the United Kingdom are now disused, and many have been returned to agriculture. In the march of progress, others have been obliterated — either beneath the ground as at Warmwell in Dorset, now a huge quarry; on the ground, illustrated by property development at Gravesend in Kent, or above the earth as seen in the massive development of Heathrow, the former Great West aerodrome. Yet, by name and reputation, they remain as Wilf Nicoll aptly described them in 1978 'memorials to fighting men' and those that still exist — overgrown, silent and forgotten — present a sad and haunting spectacle.

Two features on different aspects of airfields are therefore included in this issue. Appropriately in the fortieth anniversary year of the Battle of Britain, the first concerns one of the best-known fighter aerodromes of 1940 — Hornchurch — and originated with a letter from a long-standing reader, Robert Ballard, who then lived in the area. Having read of the planned publication of *The Battle of Britain — Then and Now,* he was interested to know if it included an account of this illustrious aerodrome with a history going back to the First World War, and sent us a number of photographs he had taken of its demise. In fact, the book had already gone to press but it was felt that his contribution should not be overlooked, offering as it does a nostalgic look at an aereodrome in its death throes. This is his story.

R.A.F. STATION
HORNCHURCH

TECHNICAL SITE, OFFICERS' MESS, LAND
Three Hangars and Numerous Substantial Brick Buildings

THE FREEHOLD FOR SALE WITH VACANT POSSESSION

KEMSLEYS
Chartered Surveyors and Auctioneers

Then, quite suddenly, it was announced on November 15, 1962: 'The station is now surplus to Air Ministry requirements and is for sale. Part of the land is to be returned to the original owners, the rest of the station is to be auctioned early next year'.

Over the following months, there was great speculation in the local press as to the future of this historical station. One moment all the buildings were to be reduced to rubble to make way for a housing estate — rightfully a much-needed resource — and then one would read that the whole place was to be excavated for sand and ballast.

Since the first announcement of the closing of Hornchurch, there had been rumours, petitions and proposals over the careful future development of this historic site and it was the intention that Hornchurch Council, with appropriate Ministry backing, would do all that was possible to ensure:

1. That the land should be developed for the social benefit of the people of Hornchurch.
2. That the Government should do all possible to assist the Local Authority to this end.
3. That the unique history of the aerodrome demands that it should be developed so that it serves as a fitting memorial to the great part it has played in the defence of this country and to the fighting courage of the men who, for their country, served upon it.

I even had my say by writing to the Upminster and Cranham Ratepayers and Residents' Association — a committee keenly interested in the future of the site. In my letter I endeavoured to draw attention to posterity reasons: what tribute and what memorial would be left to those who had used and possibly died on flights from the aerodrome? I received an understanding and thoughtfully worded reply:

'I would refer to your letter of 28th May which was placed before my committee yesterday evening and would inform you as follows.

'Although there have been many rumours as to the future of Hornchurch Aerodrome, at the present time no definite decisions have been made.

'Deciding on the future of the Aerodrome is not quite as easy as it may appear at first sight. The land on which the Aerodrome is built does not, in fact, completely belong to the Air Ministry as there is an agreement that if they decide to sell the land, the first option must go to the original owners. Apart from this fact, much of the land is green belt which cannot be built upon and, you will appreciate, these points must be borne constantly in mind when considering the development of the land.

'Recently there has been a campaign in Hornchurch to have, as you yourself suggested, the buildings turned into a hospital. However, upon close investigation this was found to be financially impracticable as the work involved would be enormous.

'The majority of the residents in this area echo your own sentiments that something should be done in remembrance of the fine tradition of RAF Hornchurch and, whatever the future of the land, a tribute will certainly be made.

'However, as I have stated above no final decision has been reached and it does not appear as if a decision will be made for some time to come.'

I was grateful to receive that letter which was dated June 22, 1962 and I felt at least other individuals shared my view. I duly acknowledged it with appreciation and, at the same time, offered my services on any committee which might aid some eventual form of lasting tribute.

Meantime, I occasionally took long walks over the aerodrome, strolling along the tarmac perimeter of bygone days, across the airfield itself with its grass which, for the first time in forty years, had been allowed to grow uncut in wild profusion . . . and remembering. Remembering, as I looked toward the east, and recalling squadrons of Spitfires climbing away to do battle and then returning a few hours later with excited pilots climbing out of their cramped cockpits . . . and the ground crews eager to assist them down from their machines and to listen to their tales and encounters of how the 'show' went . . . and hot Rolls-Royce Merlin engines spluttering into silence.

As a boy living at Grays in 1940, one of my lasting memories of Hornchurch was a particular Spitfire which, upon return from a sortie, would quite regularly circle over my home en route to the aerodrome. I used to wave to the pilot from my garden with a towel — he would have been low enough to see it. It was as though the plane circled over my very home or so, as a young boy, I imagined. The pilot obviously had relations or friends nearby and wished to herald his safe return maybe. I have always wondered who he was and whether he survived those hectic weeks.

Senior Aircraftman D. Phillips had the honour of being the last man on the aerodrome when, in June 1962, a small ceremony was held outside the guard room at which he handed over the keys to Mr. R. Thornton, representing the estate agents. But here now all was quiet, only the site of those historic events was left and a silent empty sky. Their like would never be seen again.

Station badge from the gates of RAF Hornchurch displayed since 1967 at the Public Library at Hornchurch.

Eventually Friday, March 1, 1963 arrived — the day of the auction — a gathering I avoided, taking 8mm colour cine of the aerodrome instead. I watched the very last aircraft land on the overgrown grass; it was a Cessna 310 out of which emerged three gentlemen who all but ran to the auction room lest they missed out on the act of purchase on that sad afternoon. The auctioneer's hammer was poised. Bidding was brisk, held as it was with the speculators cramped into what was once the Sergeants' quarters where bidders from all over the country had come — perhaps no more than a hundred or so.

After the deed was done, the local paper carried headlines such as: 'The Glory Knocked down for Half a Million'; '£517,000 for airfield'; 'Ex-Erk buys a £46,000 slice of RAF history' and, sadly — 'Aerodrome sold for £517,000, Council unable to bid'. The latter headline referred to the last ditch efforts by Hornchurch Council to stop the sale and they were not allowed to bid at all. It was all over within a couple of hours; afterwards developers walked with satisfactory step to their cars whilst others strolled less enthusiastically — victims of a possible last bid perhaps.

Officers' stores, barracks, messes, a total area of 53 acres, sold for £410,000 to Maylands Green Estates for housing development, bidding having started at £100,000 and taking just seven minutes to sell. Officers' mess — 3½ acres — sold for £46,000 with bidding starting at £20,000. Time taken to sell — four minutes.

Thus it was that on that clear, sunlit but cold Friday afternoon, the historical site of Hornchurch aerodrome, with some fifty years of military aviation history, came under the hammer — the death blow was dealt and executed in just seventeen minutes at a cost of £500,000. I surveyed the scene with not a little sadness and walked around the buildings and into the immense and empty hangars — scenes of such gallant activities a quarter of a century before and, as I looked around the deserted place, I recorded the picture on cine film.

It was on the eastern fringe of the airfield that Spitfires generally seemed to be dispersed and parked in greater numbers than any other part of the aerodrome in readiness for a scramble. Now all was still and, as I pointed the camera, it brought to mind the past.

Some three years later, in March 1966, the Essex Demolition Contractors moved in to commence the razing of the station. The picture was now sad indeed with destruction everywhere, trees uprooted and buildings either demolished or in the process of demolition. It was a picture which twenty-five years earlier Goering's Luftwaffe had themselves hoped to achieve but failed. So swift was the demolition that the Royal Air Force station crest was discovered buried in the rubble and nearly lost for ever but, in the event, was fortunately salvaged by the contractors before their departure.

Little now remains to identify the once famous air establishment. Cavendish Avenue, which lies opposite the original main gate, still exists, as do the commanding officer's and other one-time higher ranking officers' accommodation — now to be seen as condemned detached houses. Debden Walk approximates the alignment of the original main entrance and the road which led into the station. Mitchell Junior School stands near the site of the former Station HQ whilst the technical site has now been replaced by a pleasantly designed housing estate. Signs such as Coltishall Road, Manston Way, Bradwell Close, Duxford Close, Wittering Walk, Stansted Close, Hawkinge Way, Digby Walk, Northolt Way, Tangmere Crescent and Leconsfield Walk *(sic)* remain to remind one of other Fighter Command stations. The road now known as Airfield Way, which fringes the eastern side of the estate, is on the line of the old perimeter and tarmac apron to the three hangars. Still to be seen are some of the original trees planted in 1930 although the yew tree which, until recently, grew beside No. 16 Roborough Walk — originally beside the watch office outside the centre hangar — has now gone.

Gone too is Binder's grave — unceremoniously bulldozed in the mass destruction. Binder was the RAF Hornchurch's mascot dog which arrived in 1940 — Paddy Finucane being his first master. When he died in the early fifties Binder was buried beside the flagstaff opposite the guardroom with full military honours. Now the grave has been swept away . . . obliterated in the swift destruction of 1966 . . . to be replaced by a swathe of concrete.

Paddy Finucane's mascot dies

Binder, the Royal Air Force mascot at Hornchurch, Essex, died to-day and was buried with military honours. The dog arrived at the airfield in 1940. His master was Wing Commander Paddy Finucane, the Battle of Britain pilot who was killed in 1942.

Hornchurch today. *Below:* The tree behind the centre Hillman serves as a sole reference point to that in the picture *above,* standing opposite the derelict guard room. Binder's grave would lie in the vicinity of the white Escort.

ARTWORK OF THE EIGHTH

BY STEVE GOTTS

From the air, even the most casual observer is bound to notice the abundance of old wartime airfields — unmistakable triangular imprints in the countryside — dotted over East Anglia. Inevitably, time has taken its toll in the thirty-five years since the end of the war, yet these old places still seem to survive in spite of demolition and encroaching nature. Even where the concrete runways, perimeter tracks and dispersals have been long broken up, the outlines remain as almost indelible reminders of the time when this part of England, particularly Norfolk and Suffolk, was transformed to sustain the Allied bomber offensive against Germany. Ten years ago, the publication of Roger Freeman's *The Mighty Eighth* generated a great deal of interest among aviation enthusiasts, like myself, eager to learn more about the activities of the American Eighth Air Force in World War Two. In particular, the airbases from which the combat units of the Eighth operated began to take on a new significance, and, quite by chance, I became involved in the somewhat unusual pastime of searching old Eighth Air Force airfields for wartime artwork and graffiti.

Towards the end of 1971, a close friend and fellow enthusiast arranged for us to visit Roger Freeman at his home and he had asked if, on the way, we could visit Horham airfield to photograph some paintings in one of the buildings. After calling on the landowners in a neighbouring village, we were directed to a remote group of buildings some distance from the airfield itself and went bumping along the crumbling concrete road leading to the site. Long, black huts dominated the scene and they were in such good condition that it would have come as no surprise had crowds of American airmen come bursting out. 'NO UNAUTHORISED PERSON ALLOWED IN THIS SECTION' commanded a sign on one of the doors and alongside it another which stated: 'Regular Meal Hours: Breakfast 6.45 to 7.45, Dinner 11.15 to 13.00, Supper 17.15 to 18.45, By Order, Mess Officer'. The building was now used for chickens and the atmosphere and the heat came as a shock despite the low warning buzz of the ventilation fans outside. All the windows were boarded up, but in the gloom it was possible to discern on the walls several small paintings which, on closer examination, in fact turned out to be stencils.

However, there was better to come. Not far away stood another building, rather more derelict than the rest and littered underfoot with broken masonry and glass. On two of the walls there were beautiful paintings, quite unlike anything imaginable and a far cry from the usual subject matter which adorned most American bombers. These were of people dressed in mediaeval costume: a man kneeling and kissing the hand of a lady, a court jester, looking decidedly intoxicated and a musician with his lute. Opposite sat another man at a tavern table being served by a waitress and above them was a five-piece orchestra and their conductor, flanked by vases of flowers. Each character was superbly detailed and delicately coloured, and clearly the artist was not only very talented but also had a sense of humour, for he had painted the orchestra's bass player in such a position that the electrical cables leading to the lights ran down the middle of his instrument in place of the strings. Most impressive of all was the centre-piece, a knight clad in armour with sword, lance and shield, astride a rampant white horse — the insignia, as we later learned, of the 95th Bombardment Group (H) which had operated from Horham between June 1943 and August 1945.

In the months that followed, fired with enthusiasm, the detective work began — checking airfield plans and modern survey maps in the hope of finding more artwork. Photos in available unit histories seemed to suggest that airmen's clubs and mess halls were popular sites for paintings but did these places still exist?

Six months later we were driving a short distance from the old 452nd Bombardment Group's base at Deopham Green when we stopped at a cluster of Nissen huts, quietly rusting away in the corner of a field, and checked with the landowner that it was all right to explore. The huts were neatly spaced out and the site had obviously been a barrack area, providing living quarters with rough concrete floors, green and white painted walls, and heated by stoves beneath the now-gaping stove chimney holes. With the rain clattering outside on the corrugated iron, we stumbled over rotting sacks of fertilizer in search of any traces left on the walls by the former occupants and found, painted along the walls of a pair of huts, just above where their beds had stood: 'Ace Landry slept here', 'Ricky — 16 missions', 'Brooklyn', 'Gee Box Curry', 'Hut Tailor Shoppe', among others. Most curious

Top: **The impressive mural at Horam — the first photographed by Steve Gotts in his survey of still existing Eighth Army Air Force artwork.** *Above:* **The knight with the insignia of the 95th Bomb Group (H) on his shield.**

Left: **The 'Lucky Bastard' list at Deopham Green, home of the 452nd BG.** *Centre:* **Staff Sergeant Marvin E. Barnes of the 728th Squadron outside his barracks in 1944.** *Above:* **A revisit to his old station thirty years later.** *Below:* **The certificate he 'earned' after the disaster on February 17, 1945 (M. E. Barnes).**

452nd BOMB GROUP
On this day Feb. 17, 1945
the white ball goes up for entrance into
The Lucky Bastard Club
Marvin E. Barnes
Who, today came in with the proverbial horseshoe still firmly implanted...after aviatin' in his contrail chaser on 22 forays of a plastering surgery operation on Der Fuehrer's map...using instruments distributed by the 8th Air Force and furnished by a people resolved to exterminate the house painter's quack theories on changing the face of the globe.
(21-BAIL-OUT)
AIR EXECUTIVE
GROUP OPERATIONS
COMMANDING OFFICER
SQUADRON C.O.
SQ. OPERATIONS

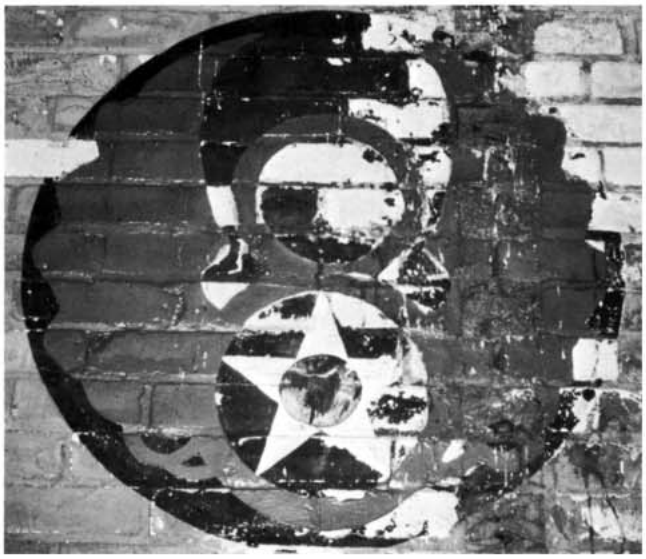
of all, though, was a list of names and dates with the title 'Lucky Bastards' This, it transpired later, was a list of members belonging to the Lucky Bastards Club — men who had completed their combat tours during the early months of 1945, usually thirty-five missions at this time.

From Marvin E. Barnes, a former Staff Sergeant waist gunner with the 452nd Group, we learned that the barrack site had been occupied by the 728th Squadron of which he had been a member. Furthermore, he had been billeted in the Nissen hut next door to the one containing the list, appropriately named 'Ice Box', and had also qualified as a 'Lucky Bastard', although he had only flown twenty-two missions, baling out once. As he later explained:

'I flew 18 missions with my original crew during the period June to August 1944. I then accepted an instructor's job in S-3, the American and British bomb trainers, for a period of five months. On January 7, 1945, I asked to be assigned to another combat crew and was accepted. After flying with six different crews during my entire tour, I was assigned to Lieutenant Joe Knoll's crew as waist gunner. On my first mission with this crew, February 17, 1945, we blew up while trying to get into formation over Tibenham. Six of the crew were killed and, after baling out and returning to base, I informed my Flight Surgeon that I had been in the Squadron longer than any other gunner, that I had seen too many rough times and that was the end of my combat flying. He took me at my word, branded me a 'Lucky Bastard' and ordered me shipped back to the good old USA. I might add that I was injured during the crash and am today what we refer to as a disabled veteran.'

As our interest in visiting old airfields grew, rumours of more surviving artwork began to circulate and it was one of these that soon led me to visit Bottisham, just east of Cambridge. From being an auxiliary RAF field, Bottisham was improved, first with steel mesh and then with steel planking, for the fighters of the 361st Group. Consequently, when the land was returned to farming, reclamation was rapid and almost total. Hardly any buildings were left standing, apart from those in the village itself adjoining a farm, but the rumours soon proved to be correct. Several paintings, including a giant Eighth Air Force insignia, had survived; in addition there were others hidden under a flaking layer of whitewash applied when the buildings were redecorated to accommodate refugees just after the war. In the weeks that followed, we carefully scrubbed the walls and uncovered a number of murals — a large Statue of Liberty, another Eighth Air Force insignia, the silhouette of a Flying Fortress escorted by a yellow-nosed Mustang with the quotation 'Here's a toast to those who love the vastness of the sky', and what has come to be known as the 'Flying Tractor' — literally a farm tractor with wings. Sadly, most of the individual unit insignia had long crumbled to dust but a few remained, including those of the Group's component squadrons and ordnance company.

Three months later I followed up a rather dubious report of artwork existing in former Red Cross buildings on the 385th Bomb Group's old airfield at Great Ashfield, some ten miles east of Bury St. Edmunds. It was raining again and there was no shelter to be had on the bare concrete floors which were all that was left of the buildings it had been suggested might be worth a visit. I was just about ready to call it a day when I passed a farmhouse on the perimeter of the base. After chatting with the owner who had lived there during the war, he lead the way to a lean-to shed containing a muck-spreader. There, nailed to a wall, was a seven-foot-square wood panel, hinged in three sections, and on it, painted in a circle, a huge cartoon character sitting astride a bolt of lightning and using a machine gun barrel as a pea-shooter. The emblem was entitled 385th *Fighter* Squadron which posed a puzzle that was promptly solved — the farmer's brother had been given the panel by an American at nearby Honington where the 364th Fighter Group, comprising the 383rd, 384th and 385th Squadrons, was based from February 1944. The artist had certainly chosen a novel canvas — three sections of a plywood packing case which had once contained a 110 US gallon drop-tank for

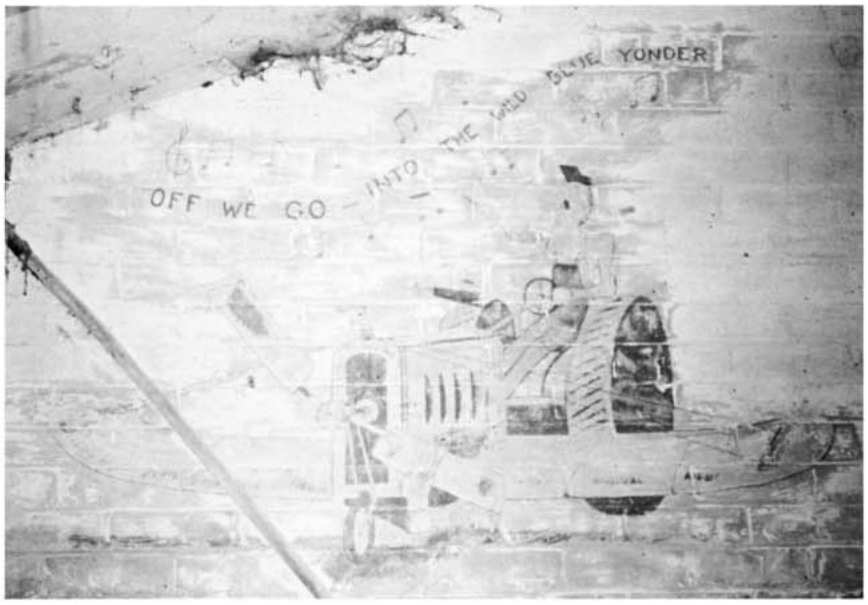


Above: **Bottisham and the 361st Fighter Group. More than a quarter of a century after the occupants departed, their wall paintings live on.** *Below:* **The Flying Tractor.**

a Lockheed P-38 Lightning. Being in the lean-to had not done it much good, but it was by no means beyond repair.

Some ten months later, in March 1973, on the way to visit the numerous buildings still existing on the former technical site at Mendlesham, we spotted a small dilapidated building through some trees. Through the window, on the wall directly opposite, was a stunning sight: a huge circular insignia consisting of a Red Indian chief riding a bomb. By now the owner had arrived and stated to our horror that the building needed to be repaired and the whole interior would be painted over. Nor was the emblem all that was to disappear; just below it and along one of the other walls were several cartoons of GIs in a variety of comical situations. All that could be done was to record the scene on film.

The lure of a large mural to be found at the former home of the 92nd Bomb Group at Podington, in a remote part of Bedfordshire near Wellingborough, led a group of us on a June evening past the basically unchanged, white-painted control tower to a number of huts just off the old perimeter track. With the owner's assistance, we located the right building and, in the gathering darkness, pointed our car towards an open door leading straight into the room containing the mural. On full beam, the headlights lit up a vast



In March 1973, Steve photographed these paintings at Mendlesham. At that time he was told that they were about to disappear as the building was due for repair and would be repainted. However, he must have stated a good case for its preservation as five years later he returned to find the 18th Bombardment Squadron insignia *(left)* **still intact.**

Above: **A Fortress of the 92nd Bomb Group still flying on the wall of a hut at Podington — now a centre for drag racing.**

Flying Fortress in full flight — guns blazing, bombs falling, flak bursting — painted high on a partition wall. Perhaps with justifiable pride, the artist had signed his name: 'Big Picture by Staff Sergeant Waldschmidt.' In another part of the building were somewhat smaller paintings of another B-17 and a pair of P-51 Mustangs. Regrettably, both had been badly defaced by vandals whereas the 'Big Picture' was fortunately out of reach.

Stories of artwork near the 306th Bomb Group's old base at Thurleigh, five miles north of Bedford, certainly seemed worth following up and, about a month after the private view at Podington, outside the boundary of what is now the Royal Aircraft Establishment, the contents of three particular barrack huts (other than their rusting vehicles and minus the horses and pigs they had been converted to shelter) presented more facets of life in the Eighth.

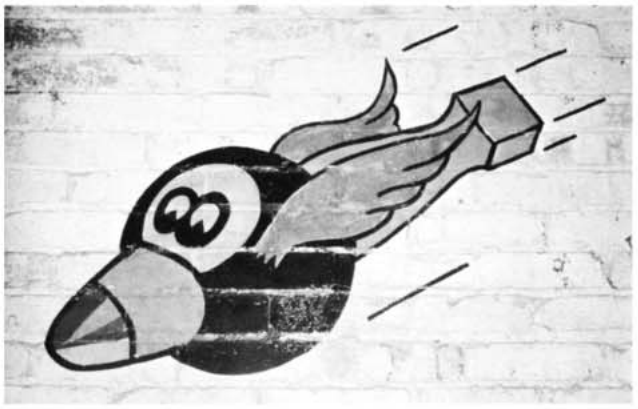
In two of the huts, airmen of the 423rd Squadron had written in pencil on the plasterboard walls lists of missions flown. One of these was compiled by a Jay McDonough of Chicago, beginning with a mission to Cologne on October 5, 1944 and ending with a raid on Falkenberg on April 19, 1945: a total of thirty-two missions. It also recorded that he was awarded the Air Medal with four Oak Leaf Clusters and that he received the Purple Heart when he was wounded during a mission to Hamburg on November 6, 1944, when according to the list he did not fly again until December 11. In spite of the grim remarks and the all too familiar targets, there was still room for humour. McDonough's list had its own star system for the toughness of a mission. One star meant that it was 'tough', two stars 'pretty tough', three 'damn tough' and four, later upgraded to five, 'tough shit'! Having been injured that day, the Hamburg mission merited five.

In another of the huts was a list of Sergeants of the 306th who had qualified for the 'Hall of Fame' — they had all been awarded the Air Medal, whose ribbon colours were painted above their names. Just above this list, someone had written a comment reflecting the cynical sense of humour shared by most combat crewmen who had flown over Europe: 'Shorten your tour with a trip to the Ruhr!' The hut which had been turned into a pig-sty contained even bolder graffiti in red paint on the walls and ceiling panels. There were typical American-sounding names such as 'Urban J. Lewis, Toggel Tessie' (the latter being the name of his aircraft), 'Staff Sergeant Bob Cory, only Top Turret Bombardier in the Eighth Air Force' (which apparently was true!) and 'Staff Sergeant Earl L. Blucher, Detroit, Michigan' who even summed up his missions and years of service with the Group.

Over the years, the often lengthy process of tracking down the existence of artwork or graffiti helps develop an instinct for the more likely places in which it may lie undiscovered or, more accurately, unknown except perhaps to an occupier or landowner or others in the know. Back in 1972, for instance, we had found nothing at Shipdham but it was not until June 1975 that I became aware of paintings some distance from the actual base. These turned out to be pin-up girls based on the style of Alberto Vargas, whose creations graced the pages of *Esquire* magazine, and were perhaps the most typical of all the USAAF artwork I had seen. The landowner was living in one of the airfield buildings, suitably refurbished and modernised, and was pleased to show me around, mentioning the various American visitors he had entertained over the years. In a rather dilapidated part of one of the buildings, which had at one time housed pigs, blossomed at least five pin-up girls worthy of photography, one of whom was recognisable as the figure in many of the most frequently reproduced photographs of the noses of B-24s and B-17s.

Another of the buildings contained a cartoon which covered practically a whole wall. It depicted a post-war bar room scene with characters, in civilian dress, leaning on the bar reminiscing about the war. In the foreground, a small boy posed the question: 'Hey Paw — tell me again how you and the boys were sweatin' it out in the ETO back in '42, '43, '44 and '45!' In an adjacent room, an elegant red tile fireplace still remained —

Trophy preserved by Steve Gotts from a hut near the 306th base at Thurleigh.



The 44th's 'Eightball' insignia portrayed *(left)* on one of their B-24 Liberators and *(right)* still to be seen on the brickwork of the Group Headquarters building at Shipdham.

quite out of place in an otherwise shabby room and doubtless added by some enterprising American.

Tucked well away in one of the larger buildings on the site, and leaving no doubt as to who had occupied the station — in almost perfect condition — was the 44th Bomb Group's famous insignia, the 'Flying Eightball'. This emblem, which adorned most of the Group's original B-24D Liberators, was designed by a Major Henry Hart, the Group Intelligence Officer, during August-September 1942, while the air echelon of the 44th was based at Grenier Field, New Hampshire. The basis of the insignia was the black 'Eight' ball from the game of pool, symbolic of bad luck both in the game and in the fortunes of the Group (which during 1941-42 had been an Operational Training Unit preparing other organisations for overseas service while it seemed destined to languish in the States). Ironically enough, the 44th was doomed to have more than its share of bad luck in losses and from being under strength after it began operating from England in November 1942. The 'Eightball' design was used by all four squadrons of the Group with a different nose colour signifying each unit. The Group Headquarters version featured all four colours, either in rings or, as I discovered at Shipdham, in stripes on the nose of the bomb.

The next pictures I found myself looking at were drawings by children, circa September 1975, pinned to the walls of a classroom at Molesworth Elementary School, about ten miles west of Huntingdon. The building had been erected for the Air Ministry on Molesworth aerodrome which, in late 1942, became the base of the 'Hell's Angels', the 303rd Bomb Group. Amidst the bright and cheery atmosphere of the room, just behind the blackboard which stood clear of a wall and was permanently fixed to the floor, was an incongruous reminder of the past — bold names with dates and rows of Swastikas. Previously covered by a wooden panel, here was a crumbling but still legible record of the first twenty-six missions flown by the 303rd Group. The list began on November 17, 1942, with a target that was to become notorious for its deadly anti-aircraft defences — the U-Boat base at St. Nazaire — later dubbed 'Flak City' by the bomber crews. That name cropped up another three times on the list. Two places caught my eye. The first was Wilhelmshaven, January 27, 1943, the Eighth's first raid on Germany when sixty-four B-17s from Thurleigh, Chelveston, Bassingbourn and Molesworth were forced to bomb their secondary target due to cloud cover over the primary. The other was Vegesack, March 18, 1943, (which had been the primary on January 27) when First Lieutenant Jack W. Mathis, the bombardier on board *The Duchess,* the 359th Squadron lead aircraft, became the first Eighth Air Force airman to receive the Medal of Honor — awarded posthumously for his bravery in releasing the aircraft's bombs on time despite being wounded by flak directly over the target.

At Shipdham this female still flies her briefs once occupied by the members of the 44th Bomb Group from 1942-45.

Molesworth had two surprises for Steve: *Left:* **In a classroom, still in use, this scoresheet was visible on one wall although the mural** *(right),* **in another school building, proved on examination to be of post-war vintage.**

Whilst at the school I heard about another piece of artwork, supposedly in a disused building on the other side of the airfield. Over there, a detachment of American airmen from Alconbury were manning a small fire section, apparently in support of the USAF store on the base and, after the usual explanations, they agreed to show me to the relevant building. Although I was driven to it in their highly-polished fire-engine with what at first sight appeared typically American panache, this proved to be a practical manoeuvre as the ladder was required to reach the artwork through a hole in a false ceiling which had been added to the building during its conversion into another school. Just above this ceiling was a large mural painted in three parts, apparently symbolic of Anglo-American military co-operation. Flanking the central design was a crouching lion and an eagle perching on a tree branch; each part of the mural was beautifully detailed and coloured, particularly the three figures symbolic of the American armed forces. However, the installation of the false ceiling had unfortunately obliterated the lower part of the centre-piece . . . and the aircraft were elderly jets.

One of the many intriguing murals in the Eighth's wartime buildings was in the Bermuda Room of the officer's club at the 309th Bomb Group at Framlingham. Its subject was a beautiful mermaid named Milly who reclined in a fish-eye-view of the ocean on a wall behind the bar. Inside and out, the building was in remarkably good condition and after several laborious hours of clearing away an accumulated mass of farm materials the Bermuda Room began to look like itself again. The enormous fireplace looked immaculate and the roof beams still retained much of their olde worlde charm which stemmed from a light timber framework covered with painted cloth. However, of Milly no trace remained; where once she had graced the wall were only a few wisps of sea-bed scenery.

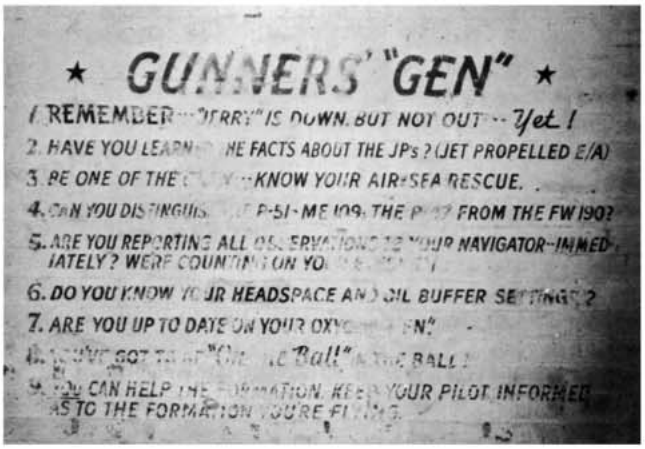
Like many other airfields of the Eighth, the old 309th base at Framlingham continues to retain its links with the United States through the 'Friends of the Eighth' in this country and, in the summer of 1978, the association helped host a party of veterans, many of whom were returning to England for the first time since the war. With one of them, Ross Davidson, a former 92nd Bomb Group pilot, I went with a colleague on a tour around his old station at Podington. The Fortress mural remained intact although by now the original door had been bricked up and the building turned into a pig sty. Although safely beyond the reach of vandals, the mural was now prey to a new risk and a crust of what looked like corrosive 'dirt' generated by the new occupants had now appeared.

That same summer, I also returned to Knettishall, former base of the 388th Bomb Group. Apart from a trip to one of the dispersal sites, I had not visited the airfield since cycling there from nearby Thetford a week after the discovery at Great Ashfield about six years previously. At that time, as I had leant my bicycle up against the wall, I had visions of myself in Harvey Stovall's role in *Twelve O'Clock High* although even in 1972 the base had been virtually cleared away. All, that was, except for the briefing rooms. In them, clearly discernible, were the slogans and last-minute reminders for air crews preparing to venture across the enemy skies of the Continent. With the passage of time, this 'official' artwork presented a depressing sight — the briefing rooms had been stripped of their roofs, doors had gone, and the weather was doing its worst to expunge the paint from the brickwork.

In heartening contrast, later the same day at Deopham Green, I was able to examine and photograph murals whose survival was hopefully assured in a building refurbished and used by the local district council. These were similar in style to the Horham murals and featured Robin Hood with two of his Merry Men. Also in a neighbouring hut were excellent reproductions of various Walt Disney characters — the inevitable Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofey.

A further encouraging sequel rounded off a return trip to Mendlesham in the autumn. The building amongst the trees that had stood derelict five years before had been completely refurbished and incorporated into a poultry

Sadly, the 'Milly the Mermaid' mural which once graced the Bermuda Room in the Officers' Club at Framlingham can no longer be seen.


★ GUNNERS' "GEN" ★
1. REMEMBER ... "JERRY" IS DOWN, BUT NOT OUT ... Yet!
2. HAVE YOU LEARN ... HE FACTS ABOUT THE JPs? (JET PROPELLED E/A)
3. BE ONE OF THE ... KNOW YOUR AIR-SEA RESCUE.
4. CAN YOU DISTINGUIS ... P-51 - ME 109. THE P ... FROM THE FW 190?
5. ARE YOU REPORTING ALL OBSERVATIONS TO YOUR NAVIGATOR-IMMEDIATELY? WERE COUNTIN ON YO
6. DO YOU KNOW YOUR HEADSPACE AND OIL BUFFER SE ...?
7. ARE YOU UP TO DATE ON YOUR OXY ... EN?
... GOT TO BE "OUT ... C Ball" IN THE BALL!
... CAN HELP THE ... FORMATION. KEEP YOUR PILOT INFORMED AS TO THE FORMATION YOU'RE FLYING.

READ - For Your Safety - HEED
DO NOT TALK ABOUT TARGETS ROUTES TIMES TO ANYONE NOT ON MISSION--
LEAVE ALL PERSONAL PAPERS & VALUABLES IN QUART ... OR P/W ROOM.
PICK UP ESCAPE KIT AND MONEY POUCH FROM YOUR CO-PILOT AND CARRY THEM WITH YOU - INSIDE POCKET.
... YOUR COMPASS?
PHRASE CARD?
DOG TAGS?
PASSPORT PHOTO?
... SHOES & CLOTH ... SEE YOU THRU

The 388th Bombardment Group (H) were stationed at Knettishall from June 1943 to August 1945. It was the 562nd Squadron which was chosen in 1944 to man the Aphrodite project from nearby Fersfield when radio controlled B-17s, packed with explosives, were crashed on targets in northern France. Remnants of 'official' graffiti still remain in the briefing rooms at Knettishall.

processing plant. As the owner had indicated, the interior had been redecorated from top to bottom . . . but not in the middle of one wall leaving the 18th Bomb Squadron insignia untouched.

It is not easy to define the significance of the unique memorabilia of the Eighth in the face of the practicalities of efficient farming, the realities of housing and industrial development, or the need for new motorways and road improvements. Nevertheless, in the name of progress, artwork has been erased which could easily have been saved without any delays in demolition. Only last May the former 728th Squadron site at Deopham Green was completely demolished. Gone were a few more tenuous links with an era when people stood in awe at the almost daily sight of formations of Fortresses and Liberators cramming the skies overhead, the noses of the aircraft emblazoned with aerial artwork that appeared to express an apparently almost nonchalant defiance for flak and fighters and was probably painted by the same artists whose emblems, murals and ribaldry decorated the bases from which they flew.

Ironically, artwork painted on more durable material runs as great a risk of destruction. On those unfortunately rare occasions when notice of a building's demolition or renovation is given, panels and plasterboard can usually be removed but, short of salvaging a complete wall with heavy lifting gear, brickwork ends up as rubble.

Much of the artwork that remains does so, not necessarily as the result of a conscious decision to preserve it, but mainly because the building in which it was painted has since been put to use. However, since many such buildings lie on reclaimed farmland, deterioration continues. Vandalism is probably the most sickening threat hanging over these relics, many of which are so vulnerable for being in remote areas. All the same, for the cost of a coat of good, clear lacquer, how many of these dwindling and increasingly fragile mementos of the Eighth might yet be preserved for posterity?

Robin Hood and his Merry Men at Deopham Green — preserved because of the building's use by the local council.

385th FIGHTER SQ.